



ANTOINE BLONDIN

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*A Monkey in Winter*

Translated by Robert Baldick from  
the French *Un Singe en Hiver*,  
winner of the Prix Interallié



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# A MONKEY IN WINTER





## ONE

EVERY other night, Albert Quentin sailed down the Yangtze Kiang in his bed-boat: nearly two thousand miles to the estuary, twenty-six days on the river unless you ran into pirates, a double ration of rice alcohol if the Chinese crew didn't mutiny. In other words, there was no time to lose. Already the fall in the level of the water could be seen from the markings left by the Europeans on the rocks; at any moment the boat risked getting stuck in the mud like Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat. Quentin revelled in this kind of situation which gave him the chance to show what he was made of: without a moment's hesitation he struck inland to negotiate the purchase of a string of buffaloes and to hire a gang of trackers, whom he paid in Mexican dollars at a more favourable rate of exchange than that of the sapeke. These deals were never simple or straightforward, for the yellow men insisted on being paid in advance. This was the delicate moment when Quentin, the only Frenchman among thousands of grasping, double-dealing Chinese, confronted them with his own impassivity, a quality which none of them expected to find in a marine of his age. With a smile on his lips he tore the Government bank-notes in

two, thus making them useless, and gave only one half to the leader of the gang, explaining that he would hand over the other half when the work had been done. The Asiatic yielded gracefully, showing a connoisseur's appreciation of this ingenious manoeuvre which cut the ground from under his feet. And the boat resumed its journey along the pillow, going slowly at first to avoid the floating carcasses of buffaloes which had obviously been driven into the water up to their horns. Mme Quentin hadn't even woken up.

Sometimes they passed one of the trading-station junks bringing yak hides from Tibet to have the musk extracted from them; sometimes sampans overflowing with human excrement, which was sold for its weight in gold at the manure exchange in Chungking; less frequently the British gunboat which the five concessionary nations had entrusted with the task of protecting all this traffic against the attentions of versatile riverside residents. Occasionally the odd village would be razed to the ground. When this happened, the glow from the burning straw huts would blend with the blazing stripes of light which the headlamps of cars heading for Paris would splash intermittently across the bedroom walls. Quentin would open his eyes, listen to the regular tick-tack of the clock at the heart of the hotel, and recognize without overmuch concern that for him it had already struck sixty. All around him it was autumn. His leading-seaman's tropical uniform was soaked in sweat as it used to be in the hottest days of the rainy season. He would get clumsily out of bed, change his nightshirt in the dark, and dig blindly into a bag of sweets hidden under his bolster, trying to avoid those with an aniseed flavour, which he disliked intensely, possibly because they brought back to him the taste of pastis.

M. Quentin had started sucking sweets soon after he had decided to stop drinking. One Whit-Monday, one of his

guests had given him this tip. He had shown his gratitude by treating the man to a drink. For the guest in question was still fond of the bottle, as were nearly all the Stella's patrons, and it was this that made Quentin's conversion so meritorious, especially at the beginning, when he had to take a tight hold of his reception desk whenever the men flocked into the hotel café for their apéritifs.

'Albert, can you come and lend a hand in the kitchen?'

Suzanne Quentin's providential face would appear at the pantry door. The sacrifice to which her husband had agreed had somehow made her more beautiful. This gentle soul had also had to acquire a certain degree of resolution. She had passed from resignation to unconditional hope. To her mind, their marriage had taken on a new lease of life. The world had no idea to what extent she felt unattached, except for the irrecoverable child whom she had twice failed to bring to birth.

'Don't you worry, my dear, it's all right, I've got some work to do.'

Albert Quentin bent his coarse, blue-veined face towards his wife; they understood one another, knew that it had been a near thing. They avoided talking about *themselves* about everything else, and they went on opening a bottle of wine to stand on the table in the tiny dining-room they had made for themselves next to the linen-room. At the end of the week the maids would empty it in the company of their sweethearts, strapping fellows for whom problems of that sort simply didn't exist.

Suzanne had been clever enough never to make any complaints or demands. Quentin would have refused to become the slave of a cure for alcoholics or of a woman's whim. In those days his tempers were a by-word in the whole district, and he used to throw people out of the hotel at the slightest provocation. The rest of the time he was sunk

in an impenetrable drunken stupor, his gaze turned down like a night-light on some sluggish interior rumination. His companions declared that he was drunk on his feet. But at least Quentin stayed on his feet; which was why, one evening, for no apparent reason, he had stated, 'I'm giving it up.' Considerations of honour and self-respect, rather than a sporting determination to win a wager with himself, had helped to fortify him in the early days. It was only afterwards, much later on, that he had begun taking secret remedies.

On the nights he was not sailing down the Yangtze Kiang, Quentin saw himself once more lying face down in a meadow on the Normandy coast, his head resting on the cutlery, marked 'H.S.', belonging to the Hôtel Stella. Deadly rockets were dancing with supple grace above the German troops evacuating the public baths. Fire was rolling across the sky, shadows moving along the ground. Tanks trundled through stables, scattering the litters; flame-throwers shot out daggers of fire, breast-high; four helmetless soldiers stood nailed to the calcined wall against which they had been innocently urinating, noses to the wall and elbow to elbow, like hostages. In the distance, close to the shore, the pearls of the Channel turned over, one after another, in their foaming jewel-cases. Quentin, huddled on the ground under an apple-tree, suffered agonies at having to remain silent.

These mental pictures illustrated a turning-point in his life, the choice which the war in its twilight hours had forced him to make, without giving him any warning. She had been a long time coming to him, this war painted to look younger than she was, whom he had begged to join him under the slipway whenever Suzanne had her back turned. And now here she was, old and rotten, prowling

round him, ogling him, condemning him to impotence. Convincing yourself that it's the whores who choose you rather than vice versa doesn't really make life any simpler. The day after the landings, the enemy had ordered the complete evacuation of Tigreville. The Hôtel Stella, transformed into a low dance-hall by the Occupation, was turned into a blockhouse without anybody asking Albert's permission. He had been severely tried for four years, and this was the last straw. He refused to accompany his wife, who had fallen back on Lisieux with two trunks and the family papers, but stayed all by himself on the edge of the prohibited zone, a hulking figure under the threat of disaster. From morning to night he could be seen lurching about among the ruins, wearing a pith helmet which he took as sufficient authority to go up the steps to the hotel entrance and swear at the sentries, his sometime guests, as if they were kitchen boys. At sunset, in pleasantly nomadic fashion, he would take shelter in some deserted farmhouse, tying up in a bundle the treasures he was determined to preserve from the imminent catastrophe. High and desolate, the countryside waited. But not for long. The nights, with becoming modesty, did their best to grow shorter in order to leave the stage free for the historic days. SOME dawn spread out its nets. Lying in the lucern, Albert amused himself by enumerating the wonders he had seen trapped in the bow-nets of the sun: lovers still warm to the touch and perfectly edible provided one was careful to remove the heart; drunkards whose collops had soaked for a long time in aromatic marinades; bachelors on toast, the bane of washerwomen the world over. These bunches of drowned human beings, scarcely less real than those the tide was lining up on the beach, rose to the surface of his memory and he bade them welcome with long-forgotten words. Man is a slow and patient diver. For the first time since his

military service, the open air was his once more, as it had been in China.

Better still, on 13 July 1944 a conspiracy of projectiles gathered together over Tigreville, which had become a rather pathetic stake in the game. Villas which had not seen the sunlight since the days of the Empress Eugénie opened up like dolls' houses to the midnight sun; the church spire, split down the middle, stood out on the horizon like a springboard; the jerry-built casino went sky-high. In the sulphurous fog enveloping the cliff, Quentin realized that the whole fabric of his narrow life was in danger of collapsing, and with it the tittle-tattle and boredom that occupied his days. The bird of the future, unhappy in its cage, started singing its highest note. Albert became conscious of the bitter-sweet laceration of a divorce within himself. What he had lacked the courage or the indifference to do—pack his bags and slam the door which his profession and his instinct told him to leave open—the battle was taking upon itself. All around him, supernumeraries were massacring one another in order to amend his destiny. The crooked old war was at last entering into that magic realm in which a shell-burst, like the wave of a wand, turned pumpkins into coaches or handcarts. The beautiful bird of the future was singing fit to burst.

However, Quentin felt no desire whatever to go and shake a leg, least of all in society. The likelihood of appearing before the private courts of conscience, before those everyday juries who know you all too well, and the futility of his nursing that grandiose hope of achievement which is so noble in a young man, were cruelly borne in on him. Years ago, the Republic had given him his share of tropics, saké and Annamite women. So far, so good. But when you leave it to the R.A.F. or the Luftwaffe to break the chains which have bound you for thirty years, that means you were born

to wear those chains. About three o'clock in the morning, picturing Suzanne in exile, sitting on her suitcases outside some cathedral, a victim of circumstance marked out by fate for the public soup-kitchen, he was appalled at the thought of taking to the road with that innocent creature. Events seemed determined to take no account of his opinions, and he had few arguments to advance in his favour, apart from offering up in sacrifice the wild garden of drunkenness, the tortured acres where he had his home. He did not hesitate to make that offer, staking his kingdom in a flash: 'If I return to my hotel, if at dusk Suzanne lights the sign which is our sign of life, if a traveller attracted by that night-light asks me for his key, then I shall never touch another drop, no, never! . . . ' The name of God, invoked in this drunkard's oath, was lost in the din of the bombardment, during which Quentin, lying with his head buried under all his paraphernalia, listened passionately to the metallic pulse of the coffee spoons against his ear.

Some time after this, hounded out of the ditches and into the lanes by the fighting, he decided that he wouldn't yield another inch to this unspeakable enemy who was driving him away from his home. At the first hint of lull, he stationed himself at the side of the road to thumb a lift as he had often done during the last few years. The first vehicle to stop, an English armoured car for a change, agreed to take him on board. Returning to Tigreville in this conveyance, he was considered for a long time as the town's liberator. But Quentin had known, as soon as he had caught sight of it in the distance, that this house of his which he had won back from Fate would henceforth be his prison. He was not the man to try blackmailing God a second time; this liberator, bound by his oath, had become a captive.

The hotel, half-way between the beach and the station, had suffered very little damage. The railings along the side



of the square were bent in, the front of the building chipped, the roof holed; there were shell-splinters in the loft and twenty pounds of broken glass littered the courtyard, where a Canadian and a young chestnut-tree were entangled in death. But the sturdy walls stood firm, there was enough furniture left for three bedrooms, and the plumbing, the most vital part of the whole hotel, was still functioning relentlessly. When she got back from Lisieux, Suzanne gave a sweet smile and said, 'It's like people, you don't really appreciate them until you've nearly lost them.' Quentin set to work in a fury. The following season he reopened the hotel and kept his promise: henceforth the smell of lavender would reign over his mornings, and he would know the kind of happiness that can be tidied away in some cupboard or other.

Ten years later, with his thirst calmed down, his paunch in full bloom, and everything swallowed and digested, he had no regrets.

The restaurant did fairly good business. Except in the summer months, when it suffered from comparison with the hotels in the neighbouring resorts, the Stella, which was open all the year round, offered a possible halting-place on the road to Paris. The Quentins had taken on a new staff: a cook and two diminutive maids, little more than children, whose bursts of laughter set the glasses trembling. Thus Suzanne remained the only witness to the old days. Quentin was no longer held in the grip of a legend; nowadays he spent most of his time in the hall, behind his counter, watching the wind change. Travellers took his calm, twilit, crimson face for a mask of unconsciousness.

On the other hand, the café had been in a bad way since he had stopped going into it. The locals preferred to go to less imposing bars where there was at least a chance that the *patron* might, if they were lucky, treat them to a drink on the

house. Strangers, guided by the gregarious instinct of the drinking fraternity, sensed as soon as they opened the door that the place had been abandoned, and joined in the general migration. The bar had become a necropolis of dummy bottles advertising out-of-date drinks, dominated by a stately cash-desk in varnished wood from a brasserie in the Boulevard de Strasbourg, a sort of rostrum for buxom schoolmistresses in which Mme Quentin had completed her apprenticeship as a cashier in 1921, when she was just engaged to a leading-seaman serving in the Far East whom she saw as another Pierre Loti, and used to entrust to the Trans-Siberian express love-letters which Wrangel's Cossacks were in the habit of intercepting.

Quentin had elected to do his military service in the Chungking area, at the most distant post established by his motherland in a foreign country. The Treaty of 1905 which had put an end to the Boxer Rebellion had brought into being a garrison of half a dozen men on the banks of the Yangtze Kiang, a sort of river deposit left behind by History. Thrilled by everything exotic and eager to know all the forms which the unfamiliar can assume, Albert had learnt a great deal about man and Nature. But this precious stock of knowledge had been of no use to him, except to fuel out a dream of a journey down the river. And even so, now that he was sober and addicted to sweets, he found it impossible to extend his imaginings as far as Shanghai. Every night saw him increasingly bogged down in a dull reverie in which he got involved in problems of navigation, worried endlessly about dockside brawls, and kept on putting off the end of his journey—as if he were afraid of facing the expiration of his leave in the international concession, and of discovering then that he lacked the necessary skill in self-deception to disguise the fact that beyond Shanghai there lay nothing but emptiness, a long sleep lasting thirty years and more.

Suzanne choked down a groan and turned over to face her husband with a wifely solemnity which Quentin found moving.

'You're eating, my dear,' she murmured.

At first, this secretive crunching, this satisfied swallowing had got on her nerves, just like the whispering of the other girls in the dormitory, years ago. Now, if she noticed it, she derived comfort from the noise: night was still conspiring to ensure the contentment of her days. Albert, taken by surprise, swallowed his sweet.

'You ought to be asleep,' he said. 'It's past midnight.'

'I was asleep. . . . Has Monsieur Fouquet got back?'

'I don't know,' he growled. 'It's none of our business.'

The odd thing was that he had been wondering the same, not just because that night Fouquet happened to be the Stella's only guest, but for other reasons which were still obscure, reasons which he did not try to understand, and which he might never understand if, tomorrow, the young fellow asked for his bill and the railway timetable, a trick guests often played on you, just as you were beginning to feel a positive liking or a violent dislike for them. Quentin, who behaved like a deaf-mute most of the time, was always told at the last minute. Sometimes indeed, as if acting on a sudden impulse, people would disappear without his seeing them go. Their rooms were aired to banish the memory of them, and he learnt that somebody had left from the floods of white drapery which stayed on the window-sill for a whole morning, an answer to the black hangings used to give notice of a funeral. The change of faces was marked first of all by a change of habits, which transformed the tea and milk into plain black coffee, the bottle of Beaujolais into a quarter-bottle of Vichy water, the seven o'clock call into a nine o'clock call, the underdone steak into a veal collop. Next, if there was time and leisure enough, you

noticed the differences in character, which were far less obvious. The nature of people's preoccupations at Tigreville was much the same for everybody: the holiday-makers asked about the fine weather, which became inextricably associated in their minds with the state of the world; the commercial travellers weighed up the prosperity of the district and called down money upon the earth with prayerful libations; the children worried about their shrimping with a frenzy closely related to that of obsessive love. Health, money and love are pretensions of all too commonplace a character. Entrenched behind his desk, Quentin saw humanity as an interchangeable herd whose separate members owed their individuality to nothing more than the most futile idiosyncrasies. But when Fouquet had arrived, Room 8 had suddenly begun living a life of its own, a separate existence from that of the rest of the hotel; it had become M. Fouquet's room, and perhaps they would go on calling it that all through the winter, when he had gone and nobody else was expected.

'Did you give him the garden key?' Suzanne went on.

'Yes. He'll be all right.'

'Did he ask for it?'

'No, I suggested he should take it,' he replied after a moment's hesitation. 'The other night, it seems he had to climb the railings. If he did that again, he might get hurt and we'd get into hot water.'

'He's so young,' said Suzanne.

Quentin agreed. However, he knew that Gabriel Fouquet wasn't as young as all that: thirty-five in fact. Heavy lashes, curly hair, an open-necked shirt and a certain hesitant harmony in his gestures gave a quality of lightness to his fragile and somehow unfinished silhouette. His passport continued to describe him as a student, rather after the fashion of a clock that has stopped, and the form he filled

in on arrival added that he had come from Paris and was going nowhere. Was that a characteristic of youth, to be going nowhere?

'How long has he been here?'

'Three weeks today,' Quentin replied with scrupulous accuracy, in that deep, unemotional voice which he used now that his speech expressed nothing but precision.

'He must be mad!' said Suzanne.

Although she had been born in the district, she could not understand why anyone should want to settle down at Tigreville outside the season, when even then the beach had only a dubious charm, bordered as it was by tumbledown villas, invaded by dirty sand, and controlled by a tight-fisted, old-fashioned municipality. At the end of August, the last tourists put their ties on again and went off in a quaint procession, flattered by the contemptuous locals until they disappeared from sight. After that, there were hardly any visitors other than bewildered families parachuted into the district by their guide-books, local notabilities still smoking and steaming from the hunt, and jolly commercial travellers who never stopped talking. Fouquet had arrived on October 1 with a hangdog air about him. He had no luggage with him and had paid a day's board and lodging in advance. Every day they expected to see him go, but there he stayed, acquiring enough habits to become in turn something of a habit with his hosts. During this period of the year when nobody stayed longer than a few hours, the Stella played safe and served a single, standard meal, which passing guests found excellent, since generally speaking they only had to put up with it once. But when this imperturbable young man had sat down for the fourteenth time to a lunch of *moules à la crème* and *sole Papin*, Quentin had suggested that they should introduce a little variety into Fouquet's menus. As a result, from then on he was allowed to have little cutlets

from the hotel larder. He had been accepted as one of the family without noticing.

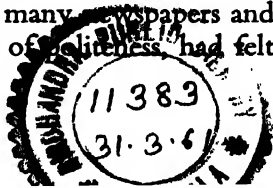
Suzanne could still hear the sound o' the taxi that had brought him from Deauville and had turned back empty towards the sea-front. She had followed the noise of the engine as far as the bend in the Boulevard Aristide-Chany, hemmed at that time of year by the foam of the autumn tide. Just as everything was about to curl up in silence once more, the bell rang, a sound pregnant with feeling, or so at least she imagined today. Albert had raised his eyebrows and looked up from the railway timetable in which he was plotting with the minute care of a Polar expedition the journey; which took him every All Saints' Day to his parents' grave in Picardy. The Quentins had long since finished their dinner; the fires in the kitchen ranges were dying out; the cook had gone off to her home in the country without a single meal to her credit, something which often put her in a temper. There were several soles left over for the next day, which was all to the good, seeing that the fishing-boats would be unable to put out to sea. One of the maids had retired to the annexe, where she did drowsy duty as night-porter on her eiderdown; the other was out walking along the cliff with the Pole from the dairy, or rather—since it was raining—lying in his arms in one of the old blockhouses on the Côte des Mouettes. If the hotel had been a little manor-house, a sort of folly built for a retired leading seaman and a farmer's daughter, the evenings would have been spent in just the same atmosphere of snug contentment. Somebody had rung the bell. The lord of the manor went to the door, where a young man apologized for disturbing him at such a late hour, explained that he had missed his connexion at Deauville, and waited in some embarrassment to be introduced to Suzanne, who had come and joined her husband. She thought he had the gentle,

battered face of a repentant angel; one of the buttons on his suede jacket had come undone; like most young men nowadays, he wasn't wearing a wedding-ring. What exactly he was repenting she still didn't know. They had given him No. 8, from which he could see, in the distance, through a quincunx of dilapidated pinnacles, a vertical sheet of steel which was the sea. Before going up to his room, he had made a lengthy telephone call, while Albert pretended to be growing impatient. He motioned to Suzanne to go to bed: 'Go on, you can see he'll be here quite a while!' Why was it, she wondered, that she had had the impression that he was trying to get her out of the way, to monopolize the new arrival? At that hour of night, in the homely situation in which he had surprised them, Fouquet was not a patron any more, just as they were not innkeepers any more, but an indulgent couple opening the door of friendship and hospitality on to the darkness.

'Is there anything you need?'

This commonplace question, staircase alms tossed absent-mindedly to the traveller, was Suzanne's to ask. Coming from Quentin, it had an unaccustomed ring of sincerity about it which the young man seemed to notice. Already half-way up the stairs, he turned to meet Albert's strangely wideawake gaze, a solemn and encouraging gaze, and thought for a moment before replying that he didn't think so. The others always replied, 'No, thank you,' automatically, and it was probably that which had first struck her about M. Fouquet.

He had stayed in his room for two days, living on nothing but tea and biscottes, and then he had come downstairs again one fine morning in the best good humour, calling Marie-Jo, who was sweeping outside the door, by her Christian names. He had ordered so many newspapers and cigarettes that Suzanne, for the sake of politeness, had felt



obliged to abandon her reserve: 'Are you laying in stocks for a siege?' He had replied, 'Don't worry. It isn't just murderers who go through all the papers in bed; financiers and dramatists do it too. They are people whose livelihood depends on the whims of society. Now, I don't juggle with stocks and shares, I don't write plays, and I haven't killed anybody; but I've got a terribly soft spot in my heart for a town called Paris, and I can't go on for long without news of the place.' As it happened, the state of siege hadn't lasted very long. M. Fouquet had ended up by going into the town. Since then, he had been out for frequent walks which tickled the curiosity of the natives, who were intrigued at the idea of having a foreign body in their midst on the threshold of winter. A suitcase had arrived for him by goods train, a money-order by post.

'Three weeks!' remarked Suzanne. 'Tongues must be wagging in town.'

Quentin propped himself up on one elbow.

'I hope they're not talking about him, because they've got no right to say anything. Fouquet is under our roof; he's our guest; he does what he likes. Have people been asking you questions about him?'

'They've tried, of course. I start talking about something else, but it isn't easy: he wears such loud shirts, and those corduroy trousers. . . .'

'They see plenty of those in summer.'

'That's the point. It's the reminder of summer that flummoxes them. He's got the seasons all mixed up.'

At the hotel, Fouquet was no trouble to anybody. He had the art of joining in everyday life without being a burden on it, coming back from the market with flowers for Suzanne, chocolates for the maids, and on one occasion a cigar for Albert, who refused it. He left these little presents in obvious hiding-places, without saying a word. They were



not so much presents as intentions, words in an embryonic language such as explorers have met with in certain savage tribes, and country girls in the boys they will later marry. When he seemed on the point of growing tame, his indifference to everything around him was almost as great as Quentin's; he arrived punctually for his meals; he read the paper over his half-bottle of wine. The next day, for no apparent reason, he would take exception to the menu, buy crabs and cook them himself, and ask to be woken at five in the afternoon: a sort of happiness reigned in the house. Then, in the same unexpected way, he would go back to his old pattern of living and they would be afraid that he was angry. But Fouquet was never angry, he was just somewhere else. Quentin kept a quiet eye on this queer but easy customer.

'If only we knew what his plans were,' sighed Suzanne.

'That really beats the band!' said Quentin coldly. 'Year after year we complain that the bedrooms get dilapidated because they're empty eight months out of every twelve, and that this bears heavily on our budget, and when for once we get somebody permanent you want this gift from the Gods to send for you before he goes to sleep and tell you all his little secrets. This isn't a convent, you know, so why start behaving like a Mother Superior?'

'I suppose you get like that at my age,' she replied. 'If I can see too far ahead it worries me, and if I can't see far enough I feel suffocated. I like to know how things stand from one day to the next. You might have a word with him. . . .'

'It's none of my business: I've got nothing to say to him. That youngster is occupying far too big a place in our thoughts. It's our fault really; the trouble is that we're bored, the maids are bored, the town is bored. . . .'

'There's always room for a youngster with old people.'

'This one's too far away from us, and we aren't old people. . . . And now, goodnight!'

'It's sad to see a young man all by himself,' concluded Suzanne.

Quentin knew that Fouquet hadn't come back. He couldn't be absolutely certain, but he felt pretty sure that he was right; possibly he had been listening for him without knowing it. After all, it was part of his duty as captain to take an interest in the comings and goings of his guests. And then he had to guard the house, too. . . . All the same, he couldn't help wondering what the young fellow could be getting up to in Tigreville, where everybody had gone to bed long ago. He applied himself to shutting out the picture of an elegant and vulnerable silhouette moving through that maze of windswept streets; then imperceptibly steered for Hankow, where delicious Chinese dishes were waiting for him.

Quentin found himself standing by his bed, not knowing whether he had fallen asleep or not. He hadn't heard the key in the lock, just a sudden din, a heavy swell on the troubled surface of his consciousness. Two strides took him to the window.

'Who goes there?'

The garden looked as if it had shrunk in the rain, the Virginia creeper like dark washing, the hydrangeas like secret conclaves meeting in the fog. He grudgingly bent his thick waist across the window-sill: towards the left-hand wing of the hotel a thin strip of light underlined the solid wooden shutters on the ground floor.

'What's happening?' asked Suzanne.

'There's a noise in the café.'

'Don't go down there,' she said.

Quentin shrugged his shoulders: in China he had slept for eighteen months with empty tins arranged outside his door to warn him of the presence of the thieves who used to get into the post by crawling over the roofs of the adjoining pagodas. He calmly pulled on his trousers as if it were just a matter of going to turn off a dripping tap.

The dining-room, where the furniture was creaking in the dark, was open, revealing the crudely lit café beyond. Never before had the rubbish accumulated in this latter room made such a forcible impression on Quentin. Still-lifes featuring scarlet game hit you in the face, sending you reeling against sea birds preserved in full flight above the cashier's desk. In one corner, a rustic wardrobe lying on its side, like a horse-coper's hallucination after the fair, had obviously once done service as a bar; the dusty surface still sported a row of dummy bottles of *Oxygénée* and *Lilet*, another nightmare vision. At the far end, a coppice of coat-stands, commonly known as parrots, mingled their branches in pitiful confusion.

Gabriel Fouquet was sitting at one of the little tables, his head cradled in his elbow. It was his head which Quentin saw first of all, damp and bloodless; it looked as if the young man were holding it under his arm. Lined up in front of him were an ice-bucket which he had unearched behind the sideboard, a complete set of glasses, from the beer mug to the thimble, and a few cardboard bottles presented by the advertising agents, one of which had fallen over, knocking down a tall champagne glass and a balloon glass. Luckily the real drinks were locked up in the office, in a strong-room of which only Suzanne knew the combination.

'Hi, Dad!'

Already, in the doorway, Quentin had recognized the smell; now he recognized the intonation.

'Monsieur Fouquet, have you been here long?'

Fouquet unfolded himself and looked round. He was obviously making a considerable effort to pull himself together. His face had changed; it looked rather like a photograph when the camera has moved. The focusing was pathetically bad.

'Sit down a minute,' he said.

Instead, Quentin went over to the outside door and shot the bolt.

'And where's my key?' he said quietly over his shoulder.

In the Rue Sinistrée, the sand was running down the street, two yellow streams flowing along in the gutters in the direction of the jetty.

'What should I be doing with your key?' retorted Fouquet. 'I suppose you don't think I'm big enough to have one of my own?'

Quentin saw that the young fellow was covered in mud, with a few bloodstains on his shirt.

'What have you been doing—rolling on the ground?'

'I had a scrap with a gipsy.'

'Where?'

'In the Rue aux Moules.'

'You mean at Esnault's?'

'I can't remember.'

'There aren't any gipsies here. You've been climbing the railings again.'

'That wouldn't happen if I had a key.'

With the swift gesture he would have used to disarm a man, Quentin plunged his hand into Fouquet's pocket and confiscated the key to the hotel.

'Hey there, Monsieur Quentin,' sniggered Fouquet. 'You're taking advantage of the situation.'

At that moment, his grace and fragility turned against him. All that was left, like the froth on a glass of beer, was that air of dubious youthfulness by means of which a deadly

vice maintains an attractive appearance in those it is attacking from within.

'You don't think you need patching up?' asked Quentin.

'You're just joking. Let's have a little drink together, the two of us.'

'Thanks,' said Quentin, 'but it's closed.'

'And what about this?' said Fouquet. 'Is this closed too?'

He extracted a flat bottle from his corduroy trousers and with scrupulous care filled two of the glasses arranged in front of him.

'Here you are, Dad.'

'I don't drink,' said Quentin.

'Get along with you! You ought to have a look at your face one of these days.'

'I can't help my face. It's the only one I've got.'

Fouquet gazed at him solemnly.

'Yes, of course,' he said. 'At your age, it's all over, you can't start again. . . . Everything's frozen hard, right down to the heart. . . . Incidentally, you don't mind my calling you Dad, do you?'

'Certainly not, Monsieur Fouquet. Tomorrow morning, you'll have forgotten all about it. I should get off to bed now if I were you.'

'You see, it's like this: if I'm the son of the house—because I am the son of the house, otherwise I wouldn't have come here—then you're my father. . . . And that's why I say: Here's to you, Dad!'

He pretended to clink glasses and pulled a long face as he tossed off his drink.

'You won't join me?'

'Who sold you that bottle?' asked Quentin. He could feel anger rising to his temples.

'Esnault,' said Fouquet, putting a finger to his lips. 'But

you musn't tell anybody, because that's my secret garden. . . . What are you looking at me like that for?

'Good,' said Quentin. 'And now, off to bed with you!'

'We've got plenty of time; the Prado doesn't shut till seven,' Fouquet declared sententiously. 'There's no danger of Claire catching us. . . . Have you been to the Prado yet? . . . Tell me if you know it.'

'It's a garden, isn't it?' said Quentin. 'A garden with a museum.'

'It's a railway waggon!' replied Fouquet with a triumphant gleam in his eyes. 'Claire and I always used to travel like that.'

He got up and started scratching the surface of one of the daubs hanging from the picture-rail, a vague representation of a colour-blind pheasant busily pecking away at some green bilberries.

'A railway waggon! Horses standing, that's to say rearing up, painted by Velasquez: 40 . . . Men lying down, painted by El Greco: 8 . . . You see, Claire and I, we always took a couple of Prados, and we had dreams enough to last a hundred years. . . . Have you met Claire?'

'I don't know,' said Quentin in spite of himself. 'She's your mistress?'

'Right. She's even got a key.'

'That's fine,' said Quentin politely.

'Except that she's gone off with it. . . . Come now, you can't refuse to have a drink with a man who's never had a key.'

'Don't start that again, Monsieur Fouquet.'

He spoke with a sort of tenderness. The young man's whimsical despair was beginning to prove contagious; its vivacity equipped him with the mask of health, the false nose of the hunger for life. It was a despair which found an echo in Quentin, and a deeper echo at that.

'In the days when I used to get drunk,' he said, 'I didn't bother my head about a key. On the contrary, I just followed my nose and by some miracle or other I always found myself in my native village, not far from Blangy in Picardy. Perhaps I expected to find another key there. They told me afterwards that I used to wait at the station, next to the ticket barrier, and look for my father. I used to stop the passengers and question them and swear at them. I got to the point of forgetting that he had died about the time I was born. . . . I've never really known what he looked like. . . . I've never known my son either,' he added, lowering his voice. . . . 'After I'd been there a whole day, the station staff, who knew who I was, used to lend me the money to buy a ticket home, and I'd get back here empty-headed, you might even say happy. It reminds me of those stray monkeys I've seen in certain towns in the East: when the weather gets too cold or there are too many of them, they're rounded up and the local people club together to hire a special heated train to take them back to their forests. . . . The only difference is that I used to feel very lonely on the journey. . . .'

He stopped short, struck by the fullness of this confidence. 'I'm giving him charity,' he thought. He wasn't going to dig up this old business, which he regarded as over and done with, just because he had a kid in front of him who was dead drunk. But open hearts are hard to resist.

'Full stop,' he said.

Fouquet, who was staring hard at him, seemed to be finding this conversation perfectly natural. He was no longer in any condition to realize what was going on.

'All right, all right,' he said. 'Don't try to make out that you're worse off than I am. My native village is right here.'

'You'll get over it,' replied Quentin.

'No, I won't! You see, I've grown very fond of you, Dad. . . . I may not show it much, but I've grown very fond

of you. . . . You're always so calm, so quiet, just as you are now. . . . And then, underneath it all, there's suffering, because you *are* suffering, I could see that right from the start. What from? Thirst. . . . Now don't try to deny it: alcohol's a blessed release, freedom, the state of grace . . . and, last but not least, a bloody nuisance.'

'And now let's get off to bed,' insisted Quentin.

'Right you are! One last little drink and then we'll hit the deck. I mustn't forget to go and kiss Madame Quentin good-night. She isn't asleep, I hope? These women, you know, they'll drop off to sleep at the slightest provocation.'

'Everybody's asleep.'

'And we're still up, just the two of us! Isn't that wonderful, Dad? What do you say we celebrate with a little drink?'

'I'm not interested, Monsieur Fouquet, and you know it.'

'Bravo!' said Fouquet in a sarcastic voice.

He got up and staggered across to the door, where he turned round.

'Just you remember this, Dad,' he said. 'I'll get you yet!'

Quentin, who had stayed behind to put out the light, heard him stumble and fall on the stairs. He went after him, got hold of him round the waist, and steered him as far as his room. Far from feeling irritated, he took a vague sort of pleasure in carrying out this rescue operation. But he didn't like going into his guests' rooms. Nowadays he found the private lives of other people disconcerting. He knew that he would never go the whole way, that he wouldn't even attempt that semblance of love between men to which they are invited by the aperitif, that lasting flirtation, and passionate drunkenness.

'Stay a little while,' said Fouquet.

'I must go and tell my wife that everything's all right.'

'Poor old boy. . . . Poor old donkey tied to his bucket-chain. . . .'



'That'll do,' Quentin cut in. 'I've known your sort for a long time too.'

'Promise you'll come and say goodnight to me.'

Suzanne, lying with her head cocked to one side in the light of the bedside lamp, had been picking out the echoes of this scene with a blind woman's eyes and trying to identify them.

'It was Monsieur Fouquet, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' he said regretfully.

'What has happened to him?'

'Nothing serious.'

'Has he had a bit too much to drink?' She would never have said of Monsieur Fouquet, 'Is he drunk?'

'No,' replied Quentin. 'He met somebody he knew and they stayed out late. He forgot that he'd got the key and he hurt himself climbing the railings. We've been having a chat.'

'In the café?'

'Yes. What about it? I couldn't bring him up here, could I?'

'Did he give you any idea what he's come to Tigreville for?'

'God help us,' groaned Quentin, 'you're at it again.'

'Then what did you talk about?'

'Monkeys,' said Quentin. 'Monkeys and monkey business.'

When Quentin pushed open Fouquet's door, he saw that the latter was still fully dressed. He was resting on his bed with his eyes shut and his hands folded on his chest.

'Come in,' he murmured, after giving a start of surprise and a slow smile, as if he had only just recognized his visitor.

Contrary to all expectations, the room was tidy: there were papers neatly arranged on the table, pipes standing in a vase, and two photographs of negresses pinned to the walls. It was as if the young man had wanted to hire out a cabin for himself, but where was he bound?

'Nice of you to come,' he said. 'I hope you won't be disappointed. Do sit down. . . . Yes, do. I'm so very glad to see you.'

Quentin, rather taken aback, perched modestly on the bidet.

'Get off the easy-chair,' said Fouquet with some heat. 'It's a bit odd here, and not very comfortable, but we always stay at this hotel with Claire, in memory of the first time, when we hadn't any money and we felt both captivated and captive in this wonderful town. Everybody in the house knows us, and they all do their best to take care of us. The papers complain that I'm not grand enough, but at least I do what I can to conceal the fact. My valets for instance, they've got rooms at the Palace—in my position, I really can't send them anywhere else—and you ought to see them stuffing themselves. . . . Perhaps I ought to say that my valets are Spanish. I probably wouldn't talk to you like this in France, but here everything incites me to tell you that I am the only great French matador, greater even than Pierre Schull: "Yo so uno! . . . Yo so unico!"'

The colour was coming back to his cheeks, and while his voice was still rather thick, he spoke with a spontaneous ease which offered a striking contrast to his chaotic bursts of speech in the café. Quentin realized that he thought he was in Madrid. At first the idea struck him as fantastic, he had grown so unused to these tricks of the imagination; he thought that the other was putting on an act, just as he himself used to do with the station staff at Blangy, when he asked to see his father. But then the disturbing sincerity of

these pretences came back to him, and he knew that to all intents and purposes Fouquet was really truly in Madrid. The slightest thing—a breath of air, an ill-judged word—might be enough to corrupt the imagination, whose castles are always at the mercy of a sigh.

‘Shall I put out the light?’ he asked cautiously.

‘No’, replied Fouquet gently. ‘What on earth for? I’ll have a couple of sherries sent up.’

Before Quentin could stop him, he had pressed the button at the head of his bed. The incongruous ringing of the bell shook the whole hotel; the walls seemed to shrink at the sound.

‘I imagine there’ll be a big crowd for my first appearance at the Arena,’ he went on. ‘Chicuelo II still pulls them in, but he’s got guts and nothing else; he can be very good, but very bad too. I’m going to force them to take me seriously. I’ve always dreamed of triumphing here in Madrid in front of a few chosen friends. But Claire won’t be there; you see, she hates watching a bullfight. No, she’ll be waiting for me behind a tray of crayfish at our old *correr*os on the Puerta del Sol. Men with their feet deep in the shells will be eyeing her from under their jealous eyebrows when I get out of the big American car my impresario has hired for me for the season. Perhaps Hemingway will drop in for a drink. . . .’

He had a happy look on his face which was quite unmistakable.

‘Let’s hope that everything goes as you want it to,’ Quentin said with some difficulty, and then burst out laughing in spite of himself.

Fouquet looked at him in surprise.

‘You’ve never been to a *corrida* before?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Quentin.

‘And you’ve come here specially! I hope you’ve got good seats at least. You certainly won’t feel lost, I can tell you that.’

You'll see Marcel, Yvan and Monsieur Rogeais there, and there'll be Kleber and Caroline too. I only hope this rain stops. But it will stop, I'm certain of that, just for the beauty of the thing. Mind you, I'd rather have rain than wind any day. When there's a wind I have to wet my cape to give it extra weight, and my wrists aren't as strong as all that.'

He held out his hands; the blood from his slight wound had congealed and it was already turning black.

'A *cornada*,' he said. 'Just a scratch I got in some hole of a place. . . . Incidentally, did you go to see the bulls at the *empartado*?' No? A pity; you ought to have done. I gather they were superb . . . though you can never tell for certain. Bulls are like matches: you only know they're good when the flame has burnt them up. Like the fool in the story, you feel you'd like to be able to put them back in their box and use them again. . . . I wonder what's become of those sherries?'

'Oh, we can do without them.'

'Don't you worry about me. I'm not working till six o'clock tomorrow evening. You know, in a way bull-fighting is just an ordinary job, especially the way I practise it: a job without any sham about it, but without any romance either. What the experts appreciate in me is my integrity. But I can tell you confidentially that I've got nothing to do till the *corrida* except lie on my bed waiting until it's time to get dressed. And getting dressed takes time; it's a very complicated ritual which I perform out of respect for tradition. Sometimes I skimp some of the ceremonial, but I always regret it, because on those days I bring off a poor *trasteo*. Our genius must have its origin in our bedrooms.'

'You mean to say you've got a toreador's suit?' Quentin asked in all seriousness, quite prepared to believe that he had.

'My suit of light,' said Fouquet. 'It's in the wardrobe.'

And with a pale smile he added:

'The light keeps me awake.'

This time Quentin stood up.

'I must go now,' he said.

'You aren't going to wait for Claire to get back? She sleeps next door for reasons which you'll understand, but she always drops in to give me a kiss when she comes back from the Prado. It's just across the road; she won't be long now. And she'd be delighted to see you. Is your wife in Madrid?'

'No,' Quentin heard himself say.

'Then come and have dinner with us. We'll probably eat here because the cooking is French. It's an excellent place, and they really do make a fuss of us. Unless of course you'd rather go to the Botin grill-room. Afterwards we could go round to Chicote's; in any case, we'll show you the town.'

'That sounds an admirable programme,' said Quentin with his hand on the door-handle.

'And what about our sherries?'

'You can drink them both. I don't imagine the prospect daunts you.'

'I'll come downstairs with you,' decided Fouquet, making an effort to get up.

The floor gave way under him and he fell back on to the bed, sighing 'What's the matter with me? . . . Now, tell me exactly where it was that we met. . . .'

His voice was that of a lucid drunkard, and suspicion began to dawn in Quentin's mind. But when he turned round to have a last look at the room before switching off the light, Fouquet was lying on his back, fast asleep.

'Poor kid,' he muttered, 'I suspected as much. It's never happened to us before, and the first time it does, it has to be him.'

All the same, he left him there in his drink-stained, rain-sodden clothes, and he reproached himself for doing this as he sank into his bed-boat, brushing against Suzanne's dead leg. She for her part pretended to be asleep, pondering the omens in her mind and wondering for the first time what it was that men thought about in the darkness.

## TWO

**C**URLED up in a ball on top of his bedspread, Fouquet was waiting for the world to take matters in hand. Several times he had woken up in the dark, lying absolutely still, and increasing by his inertia the feeling of disaster that was building up inside him. Life was withdrawing from his body, his chest tightening, his heart panicking. His attention was completely absorbed by the operations of this physical laboratory in which a thick stream of blood, too thick for him, was fermenting and pouring itself off. And even if the experiment was successful, his troubles were far from over, for he would still have to undergo the succession of tests to which every morning summoned you with its bells. Now he lay waiting for the grim angelus and the hand of dawn falling on his shoulder.

Only yesterday, I was happily counting the lumps and hollows of my finger-joints, as children do to find their way about the months of the year; you go from one hand to the other for July and August, those thirty-one-day-old neighbours. I made it twenty-one days during which I hadn't got drunk, three weeks held tight in my clenched fist, a

positive treasure. For I swear that in my heart of hearts I prefer health to illusion; but life is sometimes a trifle abrupt, and it takes so little to make it easier for a few minutes. . . . Yet I was in a sort of calm when it happened. Here, nobody knew that I sometimes happen to get drunk; I was protected both by my solitude and by the picture I had given people of myself, a very different picture from the one which carries me away and allows me to succumb when I'm in Paris. Neither picture, incidentally, is false: I'm not an alcoholic and I don't want to be one. . . . Why is it, I wonder, that in certain climates I come to persuade myself that a little drunkenness improves the quality of human relationships? I ought to know by now that there's no such thing as a little drunkenness: each boon companion goes under separately, dragged down by the weight of the troubles hanging round his neck. I put off finding this particular climate as long as I could, but I had discovered that it existed in a little bar opposite the market, where it exerted a magnetic influence on the men's comings and goings. No town is entirely asleep; even this one, with its empty shops and its windswept terraces where tourist menus continued to tender cheques which could not be met until the next season, still kept one eye open. Unfortunately for me, I knew which one. Little by little, the range of my walks had narrowed. Have I any right to say that it was without premeditation that I slipped into Esnault's at dusk? The people going into the bar looked as if they were going to a witches' sabbath, or as if they were involved in some age-old conspiracy. Perhaps I looked like that too without knowing it. I stationed myself at the end of the counter, facing the mirror. A languid girl pushed a wet bottle over to me and I clinked glasses with my reflexion, who raised his glass every time I raised mine. He kept this up for quite a time, but I had the last word because in the end I remember



that he disappeared from sight. I feel pretty sure that he wouldn't have gone off to have a drink anywhere else but in that mirror from which he stared at me at eye-level. We had started modestly enough with a couple of beers. . . . In the crowded room, where the frank smells of the farm and the sickly odours of the dairy mingled with the incense of apéritifs, the unbridled spirit of Saturday was buzzing noisily. Conversation was centred on the shooting season, which had just opened, and on the famous Tigreville Snipers, the football team whose activities were advertised in whiting on the window of every café and radio shop in the town. While we are on the subject of sport, I seem to remember talking about bullfighting last night, though I can't for the life of me remember what I said. . . . There were hardly any young men in the bar; we were all grown-ups, so there was plenty of childish talk. There weren't any women either, except for a little old creature you can see pushing a pram full of shell-fish through the streets. Sitting some little way from the rest of us, she was calmly sipping her second litre of cider and serving as the butt of what were obviously familiar jokes. I gathered that she was famous for her encounters with the Germans when there was a curfew in force.

'Hey, Josephine, tell us what you said to the Kommandature when they told you Hitler didn't want you to come home so late at night!'

'I said to them, I said, "This Hitler of yours, I don't sleep with him, do I? And he hasn't got a local name, either. Can't say I know who he is. . . . Why I don't believe he's even been to Tigreville!"'

Everybody laughed, glancing at me to see how I reacted. I began to pick up waves directed at me from all sides. Only the *patron* was apparently sending nothing out; he had scarcely acknowledged my good evening, not knowing I

suppose that people greet me by Christian name in a good many bars in the capital, and not the meanest bars either; I should have liked to tell him that. Esnault is a dark-skinned character with a dictatorial moustache stamped across his face, who looks more like an Auvergnat than a Norman. Where had I heard that he had been in trouble, a long time ago, for opening his fly while the girls from the Dillon Institute were getting out of their coach? Perhaps it was at Nicaise's café. . . .

With the second glass, of vermouth this time, I felt stirring within me the old desire to strike up acquaintance with other people, the feeling that I had a great many things to tell them, and the illusion that life would be quite tolerable if only one had a margin of existence in which it shone and glittered in its most unpretentious aspects. They say that the alchemists of the bottle gather together to get drunk. The fact of the matter is that the state of drunkenness isn't the object of their infinitely subtle ceremonies but the consequence and penalty of those same ceremonies.

Outside, I saw occasional couples appear for a brief moment between the puddles of light and the puddles of rain. As they passed the bar, they made that sulky gesture which criminals make as they are being piled into a *Black Maria*, hiding their surprised faces behind their forearms or their handbags before disappearing once more. The cross-roads turned into a dark bowl in which pairs of fish swam round and round, seeking shelter under the vegetation of the park, as far as possible from the coral lamp-standards. I didn't envy these lovers who are doomed to separation by the evening meal; they have nowhere to meet save on this thin beach of darkness which is submerged by the blazing tide of summer; the lengthening days shorten their loves; theirs are the chilly pleasures of winter. Already the languid girl was laying a table for two in a corner of the room. An

unpleasant smell of stew, which I would have found delightful anywhere else, was coming from the kitchen. A panic reflex made me ask quickly for another glass, in the hope of staving off the eviction order which I could feel was imminent. It was probably at that point that I took a bend too fast. . . . A unanimous decision suddenly produced a mass movement among the customers as if a hand had pounced on a pack of cards to shuffle them, separating a couple of accomplices, breaking up a pair of friends, scattering a hollow square of old soldiers, revealing the backs of those one had seen from the front, the faces of those one had seen from behind. Then they retired in good order towards the door, where the final polite exchanges divided them into even smaller groups for greater safety, and they left the bar without appearing to know each other until the next time. I was left all by myself on the gaming table, like a forgotten card, the white card that is never used, or else the joker, the buffoon who apes the kings.

The Esnaults were talking quietly over their meal, the fat girl's forehead almost touching her master's. I felt sure that they were discussing me. I opened a newspaper and made a determined effort to grapple with the crossword. Anyone else would have gone, but it was impossible now for me to draw back from the moment, now very near, when I should speak to them. When they got up from the table they accepted the drinks I offered them: a calvados for Esnault, a cherry-brandy for the girl. I had a calva as well to impress them, or at least fat Simone, so that they got it firmly into their heads that I wasn't a lost sheep but an old hand out on a spree, something better than an 'accredited representative', to quote the favourite expression of the paper I had left on the counter.

'Old Quentin must have been livid when you didn't come back for dinner,' sniggered Esnault.

At first the debonair dishonesty of his voice didn't make any impression on me; all that I felt was satisfaction at being correctly located in the world of Tigreville. So I made no protest, and Esnault took advantage of my silence to add:

'His holier-than-thou stuff gets on your nerves after a bit, doesn't it? When you've been up to the sort of tricks he has, you've no right to go around criticizing other people. Mind you, I'm not criticizing anybody either. He was a hell of a gay dog in the old days, though he could be a bit stand-offish even then. You see, he got the money to buy that hotel of his from his wife, the daughter of one of the biggest farmers in the district; he isn't a local man himself. . . . All the same we had some good times together! But now it's all over, you don't see anything but the bad in him.'

'What do you mean by the bad in him?' I asked.

'Oh, I don't know: the wall he puts up all around him, his bloody pride. Take that idea of his of going off to do his military service in China, instead of joining the local conscripts at Cherbourg: that's him all over! . . . You could call it his China Wall if you like; that's what I mean by the bad in him. It's bad *for* him, too: nobody knows what's going on in that head of his. Nobody's ever understood why he stopped so suddenly either. There's some say it's all on account of Suzanne, and the strong always give in to the weak. But let's be fair: for all I know, he may be a sick man; now if he had cirrhosis or cancer of the liver I'd be the first to take my hat off to him. But then he ought to tell people, dammit! . . . Here's to you! Simone, this one's on the house.'

The machine had been set in motion. The bar filled up again, then emptied once more. From a pitiful ringing noise outside I guessed that the interval at the cinema was over. It has never occurred to me to go to one of those shows, two different programmes every week, though, as Mother would say, it wouldn't do my work any harm. At Esnault's, it

wasn't over; it had even become a continuous performance. Four or five old faithfuls had hung on and were standing each other drinks with infectious generosity. Esnault pulled down the shutter outside the door and derisively introduced me as the gentleman at the Stella.

'You must be having a hell of a lot of fun with Quentin. A real old woman he is! They still give you wine with your meals, I hope? . . . The blighter really has gone over to the other side, and no mistake.'

'Everybody says you're a painter and you're going to do a bloody picture for us one of these days. You ought to do Quentin as a sunset.'

Why do people always ask me if I'm a painter? Their attitude towards M. Quentin, against whom, incidentally, I bore a grudge for putting me in this unpleasant position, suddenly made my ears burn. So I picked a quarrel with them on the subject of the weather we are having here. That's a topic on which the natives tend to be extremely touchy; many of them are convinced that if only it didn't rain so much, Tigreville would become a sort of Saint-Tropez, simple and fashionable, and they do their best to deny the very existence of the rain. They forget that this resort is an old maid born under the Second Empire, who has died on the sea-shore waiting for a suitor. We nearly came to blows on the question. At the last moment, the brawl turned into a trial of strength known as the 'iron arm' or the 'arm of honour', whence the pain which I can feel in my shoulder and which reassures me precisely because it's an honourable pain. One may prefer sitting side by side with somebody else in more restful ways, but this particular exercise, which mobilizes at a single point in the body a whole human being, nerves, muscles and mind, cleans you up from head to toe and wipes out everything else. . . .

. . . Wipes it out so completely that I haven't the faintest

idea how I come to be back in my bed. In the old days, too, I used to find my way home to Claire by some miraculous route. I often drew her attention to this vital instinct which brought the tired animal back to her bed. Claire had ceased to appreciate this obtuse fidelity and made it clear to me the next day just how odious or grotesque or pitiful I had been. That was the cause of the discord between us.

'The only obstacle dividing us,' she said once, 'is drink.'

'Then I'll drink the obstacle,' I replied.

'You frighten me,' she said. 'I'm not afraid of what you might do to me, but of what you become at times, of that unknown, unpredictable devil who suddenly appears at my side, and at your side too perhaps. I'm expecting one man, and another turns up. God knows how charming you can be, and that's the awful thing about it. Why do you drink? Are you unhappy? I wish you'd face the facts before it's too late. I need somebody strong and dependable I can lean on.'

In point of fact she was always in command of the situation, not only because of the uprightness of her character but also on account of the repentance—an inoffensive virtue—which she exacted from me. In the end I got to the point of watching Claire as one looks at the sky, with precisely the same anxiety and the same hopefulness, knowing that she had it in her power to decide the colour of the day and to change it from one moment to the next, according to the way the wind was blowing. I led a conditional existence under the constant threat of the guillotine. At the slightest suspicion of drunkenness, my mistress refused to see me, expelling me into nocturnal regions where I circulated like an independent planet. When she forbade me to accompany her to Spain, where we used to go together every year, she probably just wanted to teach me a lesson; but when she went off by herself, she showed that she could cut me off from her own happiness and that the

earth didn't stop turning just because I no longer shared it with her. This time, we are no longer two lovers testing each other and getting their breath back, we are two lovers in the process of parting. The guillotine has fallen.

Now I don't frighten anybody any more, except I suppose whoever picked me up last night in the gutter. But I'm overdoing the sordid side of that particular affair: I was really asleep under a dripping tree when somebody pulled me to my feet and put me back on the road to the hotel. I can remember a man bending over me; I can remember too a contemptuous hand that pushed me towards the pitfalls in my path so that I should avoid them. Who could it have been? I wonder? A passer-by? Or somebody from Esnault's who wanted to hurl me like a firebrand soaked in spirits at the virtuous fortress of the Stella? Or M. Quentin himself, who had come to meet me? . . . This sort of forgetfulness plunges me back into a familiar state of anguish. In Paris, since Claire left me, it sometimes happens that three or even six hours of my day escape me. In their place there appears a great black hole in which, like trout in a fish-preserve, elusive memories flash by, without allowing me to distinguish between nightmare and reality. Long afterwards, I find scraps of paper in my pocket on which strangers have written their telephone numbers, the times and places of rendezvous, or hiccuping aphorisms; but faces composed at night don't stand up to the test of day, and if I meet them later I fail to recognize them.

The last time this happened, I only really came out of the black hole at Deauville. A railway worker was tapping me on the shoulder and saying that the train didn't go any farther. Farther than what? I dragged myself out of a muddy sleep to see a pretty, flower-bedecked station, a sort of cottage with exposed beams. I thought to myself that the train was no fool and that it was perfectly justified in

staying where it was. Had I got a ticket? . . . Yes, I had one doing duty as a breast-pocket handkerchief; I had even scribbled my name and address on it just in case. . . . Which shows that I hadn't gone under without a fight. As I came out of the station, an unfamiliar air struck me in the face. On the left there were some stuffy avenues with newly-painted cottages lined up like empty packing-cases. I turned to the right, down a livelier-looking boulevard that led to the Trouville fish-market. It's a place I love, that spacious fishmongers' club on the very edge of a dock-basin; I never feel entirely lost when I see the velvet of the crabs, the anthracite of the mussels, and the damask sheen of the mackerel and the skates spread out like kites. All the same, it didn't seem as beautiful as I remembered it, a still-life whose colours were lost in the background of the picture; but spring will restore it. Lower down, fishermen with even more stubble on their chins than I were pottering about on board little trawlers faded to a monochrome by the spray. It must have been about six in the evening. I carried on as far as the lighthouse, crossed the footbridge over a lock and went on to the wooden jetty. At the end of the jetty there was the open sea; it gave me the usual shock. When I see it, I am reminded of the map of France, that profile of which the Landes are the chin, the Gironde the surly mouth, Brittany the pimply nose, the Cotentin a wart and the Seine estuary a supercilious arch on the forehead that rises, receding slightly, towards the Straits of Dover. Well, there I was, between my country's eyelids, so that its gaze could be centred in mine. I don't know whether it saw with the same eyes as I did the waves breaking on the shore like can-can dancers, lifting their green skirts, waving foaming petticoats and finally subsiding, one row after another, in a long, sweeping movement which was reminiscent of the splits. Sitting on the jetty with my legs dangling in the air,



I reconstituted in my memory the phantom cabaret we had boarded that night, before fading into one of those orange-grey mornings in which you hope to find company and in which you mustn't on any account remain alone as I am now, because you risk being devoured by the wolves of remorse, which only attack a man when he is on his own. My companions started turning towards their homes and telling me how lucky I was to have no reproaches to face. But that is the sort of consolation that is doled out to somebody who is about to be abandoned. And I, whom nobody was waiting for, I replied, 'You can see that I'm wounded. . . . Leave me, boys, and run for it!' Already they were bending over cradles or half-open beds, and breathing in the aroma of home-brewed coffee, which isn't the same as the coffee you get anywhere else. The idea of joining my daughter and carrying out that transfusion of feeling which might be able to cure me, with the two of us nestling up against one another and getting to know one another better, suddenly imposed itself on me with amazing insistence, in the face of the obvious fact that the wolves would get me before the day was out if I stayed in Paris. I had seen very little of Marie since my wife and I had separated, other currents having swept me away, but I always felt certain that I had a little fortress there which was entirely mine in spirit. This disorderly retreat was in fact a strategic withdrawal. And then too, it must be admitted that the temptation to take to the road, a temptation in which provocation is combined with redemption, is exceptionally strong in a drunkard. Turning up in Normandy after a night like that showed a certain originality. I had set off full of enthusiasm.

I knew that since the end of the holidays Marie had been a boarder at a private school in a little resort on the Normandy coast. It wasn't the health of that frail body which had led to

this arrangement, but life in Paris where she had been left rather too much to her own devices: Gisèle, who was out at work all day, hadn't been able to give her the attention she needed. The sight of young women like Gisèle going to their offices, without any sense of vocation and oblivious even of the burden of their servitude, always gives me a pang; I can't come across them in the Metro, their thoughts far away and under their arms interminable volumes in which every bookmark indicates a lonely meal, without feeling a momentary loathing for men, myself included. They pay for other creatures who purse enormous mouths in readiness for greedy kisses and who circle around us, sometimes without distinguishing clearly between us, trying to catch the whole of life between their lips, the lips of age-old carp. After our divorce, I ought to have lavished extra tenderness on Gisèle and Marie; that's the done thing nowadays. But I don't do it; perhaps I'm old-fashioned when it comes to this kind of thing; in any event, I promptly adopted the unfashionable attitudes of propriety and timidity. Awareness that I was in the wrong didn't make things any easier for me. I chose to begin my life all over again in Claire and so I didn't see my daughter growing up. But Gisèle is convinced that I left everything, home and child, to live in concubinage with a pin-table. That's how the pride which guides me in my relations with other people often places me in false positions from which I extract myself very shamefacedly. And I'm not dead yet to all sense of shame. Seeing Marie again, and doing something to relieve the tedium of her exile, was a big step for me to take.

There was a risk too that it might be a false step. It occurred to me that perhaps I was being a fool and just satisfying a drunkard's whim. At Deauville, there was still time to turn back. I could return to Paris that evening, find

my friends and say to them, 'Let us divide the cloak; it is too heavy for me. I have seen the sea: you can go on farther. . . .' Before coming to a decision, I went into a barber's shop. The hot towel, as employed in the provinces, is a work of art. When I came out it was dark again and I felt more at home. As darknesses went, I might as well stay in this one. The last bus for Tigreville had already gone. In the end I took a taxi, and the driver, in the course of conversation, told me about the Hôtel Stella.

While we were driving along the coast road, I felt a sort of hopeless impatience, of the kind that makes you say, 'Let's have done with it straight away,' and I realized that I was approaching an objective, though I couldn't be certain what that objective was. It had begun to rain. In the moonlight filtering through a break in the clouds Tigreville was suddenly revealed to me, looking like a big pie which had already been cut into and which the waves were laboriously attacking. Here I could dig myself in. There wasn't a soul in the streets. A little cloud of sand travelled along behind the wheels of the car; our headlamps unmasked villas that were closed for the winter and dazzled their unseeing windows. No sign on this blackboard told me under which roof my child was sleeping. Yet she was there, somewhere close at hand, acting as an advance-guard, and soon there would be two of us to cheer each other up.

What put new heart into me when I arrived at the Stella was the presence of Mme Quentin. To a certain extent older people reassure me, especially women, since for a long period men are liable to fall unexpectedly into second childhood. A certain serenity descended upon me recently with regard to the problems of growing old, a serenity which I attribute to frequent meditations on my mother. It is difficult to realize that one is the offspring of a young woman taken by surprise. One always regarded oneself as the son of a

level-headed housewife, when in fact one was the son of a Charleston dancer; this is something many people never even suspect. This dazzling, disquieting revelation isn't the result of browsing through photograph albums, but of tracing wrinkles to their source and scraping off the surface of smiles. Now it is a simple matter for me to discover in old ladies the young ladies they have been, and a natural prudence leads me to see in the girls of today the old ladies they are going to become. I tend to cut myself off from an over-greedy present; I no longer swallow the mouthfuls of existence whole; I rise above it more easily. Mme Quentin is no beauty, but she possesses the nobility that comes from the control of things, an authority preserved from the abuses of power by the clearly defined limits of her domain. She sheds light where light is needed, as soft and precise as a bedside lamp. I felt at once that I didn't come quite within the range of her light, that a slight adjustment would be necessary. On the other hand, it was in the half-light around her that I ran the greatest risk of meeting M. Quentin. I know quite a few of those great rocks, soaked in wisdom and experience, which sit some distance from one another, wearily watching the rain come down. You sometimes feel tempted to blow them up with dynamite. From the window in which he asked me whether there was anything I needed before going up to my room, I suspected that this particular rock was full of cavernous hollows. It seemed to me that he had held out a hand to me and then promptly withdrawn it. I hesitated. This was my opportunity to ask about the Dillon Institute, to talk about Marie, to give some sort of countenance to my stay. I didn't take it, and the doors closed. I who normally tell others everything in order to tame them, I who live on the threshold of myself because I often find it too dark inside, why did I feel the need to rouse the curiosity of that quiet couple on the night of my

arrival? Perhaps I wasn't very clear about what I was doing? Perhaps I had a presentiment that what occurred last night was going to happen, and felt it would be better to be shipwrecked with as few identification papers as possible? There's enough mourning as it is over the tomb of the unknown drunkard.

Waking up at Tigreville for the first time was an appalling experience. The effects of the alcohol I had consumed having worn off, I fell a prey to a violent depression which sought in vain for a brake in this new room. Yet a neutral ground, working like a lock, usually promotes a gradual return to normality; the mind doesn't stumble over any vengeful landmarks; the setting, instead of sulking at us, doesn't care a damn; our acts, those skilful bloodhounds, have lost track of us. One can come back to life at leisure. But this time the process of disintegration had gone rather a long way. Only millionaires and tramps can break as brutally as that with their tomorrows. Mine were howling away in Paris, so loudly that I could hear them from here: my mother was clamouring for reassurance; O'Neill was swearing that he would never do business with me again; Bonifaci was waiting for me at the 'Petit Riche' in front of a dish of smoked greaves; not to mention all the night-prowlers with whom I had made appointments in different places at the same time. On top of everything else, I was stony broke. On arrival at the Stella, I had tried to get in touch with my guardian so that he could fix me up without talking too much. But the *patronne* of the brasserie where he goes after dinner to read the racing results told me, 'Monsieur Rogeais has just finished making up his selection for Enghien and gone off again. Where are you phoning from? . . . Deauville? But there isn't anything on at Deauville just now. You're sure you don't mean Chantilly?' The conversation turned into a positive nightmare. Finally she had

agreed to take my message, laying a mysterious emphasis on certain words which made it sound like a tip from the stables and seemed certain to confuse a guardian who was born a race-goer: in his diary, fifty thousand to Gabriel by Stella and Tigreville could easily have become the basis of a fabulous bet. But nothing of the sort happened. He did the necessary, even advising me to stay out at grass for a few days, going for some gentle canters over short distances: bitters and cherry-brandy; he also promised to let me have the recipe for a concoction which would bring me back to the top of my form for the next meeting. This cowardly and reasonable solution satisfied the mood I was in just then. As soon as the sky cleared a little, I went out to look for Marie.

The Dillon Institute is on the Côte des Mouettes, in a residential district covered with half-wild orchards which extend as far as the cliff: a sheer drop, and there's the sea. It has found itself gradually moving out of the town as the other turreted villas died all around it. The Avenue de l'Impératrice marks the frontier of this no-man's-land which the 1870 war laid waste from inside before the 1940 war, at the other end of the agglomeration, destroyed the Cubist houses built in the thrifty 'thirties. In between these eloquent ruins, the war memorial none the less extols the deed of 1914, when payment was made in kind. The grasping citizens of Tigreville don't underestimate the price of blood.

So this young man who dreamed of crinolines and kicked at pebbles as he walked along, who almost expected to see his little girl appear bowling a hoop and wearing a straw bonnet and long lace drawers, while curtains were pushed to one side as she went by, this young man was a father. Nobody would have thought it and this made me feel rather proud. Yet I had no reason to be: in thirteen years, I have only twice been on a beach with Marie. She was tiny

then and used to run towards the waves with her arms high in the air. All that she remembered later of that holiday was the hair on my chest, against which I squeezed her to dry her body. She has never seen it again, and one day she asked me if I still had it. Perhaps this was a way of telling me that she missed me. She doesn't see much hair at home.

The Dillon ladies opened their celebrated boarding-school just after the 1918 Armistice, starting with a nucleus of refugees to whom they had given shelter. The founder was the granddaughter of the Hammerless Dillon who gave his name to one of the main streets of Tigreville. When she became a helpless cripple, her niece took over the running of the establishment. They belong to one of those diagonal dynasties which power is handed down from aunt to niece. The men have kept out of it, probably terrified by the shade of the great Hammerless, about whom I am still completely ignorant. The building is very impressive; it gives you some idea of what the neighbouring properties would have been like if only people had gone on watering them. But then, who had taken any interest in the younger of the Dillon ladies? Now I come to think of it, the real war memorial to the dead of 1914 is that spindly, grey-haired figure in her black dress, as she appeared to me that morning, standing stiff and erect on her lawn.

I was just about to push open the gate when a scruple of a mediocre order stopped me. I hadn't yet received M. Rogeais' money order, and I hadn't a penny on me; the taxi from Deauville and my initial expenses at the hotel had swallowed up the small change I had saved from the Montparnasse shipwreck. . . . Incidentally, in a minute I must find out how much the night at Esnault's has cost me. If I slide a superstitious hand along my trousers, I think I can hear a rustling of notes. One of the bleak advantages of that type of establishment is that you can get drunk there for

next to nothing. . . . I took a good look at Mlle Dillon: she was the sort of woman who would glance meaningly at my empty hands: parents are not allowed in here without presents. 'Naturally you are going to ask me to let Marie go out so that you can take her to a restaurant.' Not likely! For the last two days I had been reduced to eating nothing but biscottes. I had come to see my daughter, and that was all. I had only a few simple things to say to her, and lots of extremely complicated things to conceal from her. Now Marie, without meaning any harm, expects our infrequent encounters to be sanctioned by celebrations, and to a certain extent I share her point of view. I realized that I was going to muff my entrance and bang my cymbals to an empty house. But at least I could try to catch sight of her through the hedge, without exposing my stupid, susceptible amour-propre to attack.

I was shamefacedly circling round the school grounds with kidnapper caution when I heard a ragged chorus of childish voices behind me. I only just had time to hide down a side-path. The Dillon Institute, on its way back from the beach, came into sight at the top of the Côte des Mouettes, under the escort of a monitor. They passed within a few feet of where I was standing, the first few rows holding boys and girls together, most of them looking very smart. The fear of not spotting Marie filled my heart with a kind of unemotional, sporting anxiety, such as one feels on a shoot when confronted by a covey of partridges or outside a station when faced with a crowd of travellers. But I relaxed when I saw her trailing along behind, a little round-shouldered, and so small that her companions looked like her bodyguard. Just as she was going through the gate she gave a laugh and pushed the girl in front. It's a good thing not to let people tread on your toes. I thought she looked wonderful, with an air of carefree gaiety about her which she



doesn't always wear in our presence. But she swinging as with the others, 'In my father's garden . . .' and, under that grey sky, it was an orphan that I saw before me.

Early the next morning, I set off for the Côte des Mouettes once more in the hope of seeing Marie again. I believe that already I wasn't thinking so much of speaking to her and that I wasn't thinking of leaving Tigreville either. I was too far behind in my knowledge of that child, knowing practically nothing about her tastes, her habits, her behaviour in everyday circumstances. I had to learn her all over again before offering myself to her. Unmasking myself prematurely would mean a resumption of those conversations in which we entrenched ourselves in our more than usually heartbreaking roles. Enjoying the freedom of her games, Marie would go back over the ten years or so which I had lost away from her. I wasn't going to submit her to the constraint of my kisses. As Jacques Chardonne once said, those who love you are too close to you. My daughter was often disconcerted by the hugs in which I tended to stifle her, for want of better proofs of my affection. So I would just pay her the homage of my sadness at spying on her without saying a word. . . . Apart from all that, my little escapade wasn't exactly edifying.

The beach was deserted for miles, except for a little swarm of multicoloured silhouettes in a rounded cove at the foot of the cliffs. I drew nearer under cover of the rocks, deriving a feeling of youth and a bitter taste from this exercise, and not knowing whether I was grotesque, disgusting or sublime. Marie has got pretty brown legs, which gratified me, and little or no chest, though I can't say that I looked very hard. Most of the time she was lording it in the middle of a group which came together and broke up at her bidding. Here I discovered the mischievous ringleader I had often heard about. When they all ran to the water's edge,

the only thing by which I could recognize her was her bright bathing costume, on top of which she was wearing a thick pullover full of holes which didn't manage to make her look any plumper. I told myself that I must try to discover the purpose of these movements. I also decided to buy a pair of field-glasses. Marie's decrees are still a closed book to me; as for the binoculars, I took fright at the idea of looking like a dirty old man. But I could stay there, propped up against a seaweed-covered rock, glancing at Marie now and then, imagining to myself that I was looking after her and that at last we were spending our holidays together. 'Let's pretend . . .' children say when they want their games to disguise the realities of life: let's pretend to be shopkeepers . . . let's pretend we're in a submarine . . . let's pretend we're in America. . . . Well, on this side of the rocks, somebody was playing at Daddy without Mummy; somebody was being a father full of solicitude, indulgence and discretion. The ideal life, in fact. In this imaginary order of things, Marie ceased to be an orphan. And it seemed to me that she was indeed much less of an orphan than the others every time I looked at her.

That seaweed is going to take on the shape of my body before long. I have gone back there every day the weather has permitted, about the time the children come out to play. I take a book along with me, the papers, or some work for O'Neill. I have taken to smoking a pipe instead of cigarettes, because pipe-smoke is easier to conceal. In short, I am leading a quiet family life beside Marie, touched by her clumsiness in certain exercises, alarmed when she ventures near the zone where there are notices saying that the ground hasn't been entirely cleared of mines. Sometimes I am on the point of intervening, but the monitor, an exemplary nanny, calls her back just in time. My daughter hesitates for a little while to impress the gallery, especially a boy

older than herself about whom the poor girl keeps circling assiduously. Among the silhouettes to which I have gradually grown accustomed, I very soon noticed this little cock of the walk, a boy as gold as nectarine, whose long trousers obviously carried weight with his fellows. It seemed to me that Marie amused him, that he did his best to look after her, and that they tried to get into the same team as each other. I was pleased about this, thinking that the boy would be good company for her.

One morning, glancing up from my book, I had the peculiar impression that Marie was alone on the beach. She was looking out to sea. The monitor was preventing her from turning round. Was she being punished for some prank? Finally it dawned on me that a game of hide-and-seek had begun and that Marie was the seeker. That was quite enough to make me abominably partial: even if she hadn't been my own child, I should have been on the side of that pathetic creature about to set off blindfold through the world. I realized that never before had I seen her thrown on her resources as she was now. She spun round on one heel, hesitated, then started moving in my direction. Out of prudence I fell back towards the blockhouse. When I looked round, she was clambering up the rocks with a lithe grace which I hadn't time to stop and admire; I slipped into one of the casemates, a concrete rotunda connected to a long tunnel inside the hill. In the darkness I was drawn to a narrow slit in the wall; Marie was now only a few feet away from me. I was struck by the sad expression on her face, an expression which had nothing in common with the helpless look that some children have when they realize that nobody is watching or helping them any more. On each side of her tip-tilted nose, her eyes spread out in wide pools; her hair, short though it was, hung down over her forehead; she pushed it back with a tired hand and rubbed

her eyes, and I was well placed to see that it was with unconvincing gaiety that she sang out, 'It is for-bidden to hide in the block-houses!' Then, with what was perhaps excessive trustfulness, she went off without carrying out a check, already looking thoroughly discouraged. Then I heard a whisper, a dishonest whisper in the circumstances, coming from the far end of the shelter, where there was a maze of zig-zagging partitions.

'What a dope!' said a girl's voice. 'We're all right now. Did you bring a cigarette?'

'Wait till she's cleared off,' a boy answered.

I felt uncomfortable. A match was struck.

'There you are,' he went on. 'You smoke it first. . . .'

'No, you,' simpered the little bitch. 'Do you do this with Marie?'

'She doesn't like it.'

'I think it's fun, just the two of us together. The others are just kids; they don't know anything; but we know a thing or two, don't we?'

'You bet we do.'

'Look, François, why don't you try and sit next to me in the dining-room?'

'What about Marie?'

'Oh, don't bother about her. . . .'

I stole out of the blockhouse on tiptoe. I didn't want to hear any more. Marie had already returned to the beach, where she was counting her prisoners, but her thoughts were somewhere else and her eyes were anxiously scanning the whole cove, lingering on the part I had just left. I still hoped against hope that François wasn't her cavalier. He was. I believe I actually blushed when he passed politely in front of me, hand-in-hand with a pretty little piece with an arrogant look about her. Into the purse hanging from her wrist she was slipping a cigarette-end as a token of their

complicity. I discovered that there was no greater humiliation than that which we suffer through our children.

I thought that I had recovered from it fairly quickly, and now this morning I am reminded in the most unbearable way that Marie is in danger of being hurt. This threat to her happiness adds a pink knot to all those already hanging over me; it forms part of the curse which takes Claire off to Spain with God knows whom, which leads Paris to declare me a deserter, which imprisons me in drink and self-disgust. My monstrous sentry-duty among the rocks doesn't indicate that I am a voyeur; it does something worse: it stamps me as a masochist. Suffering from the fact that I am making no contribution to Marie's life doesn't help me to love her any the better, but it hurts me more. It is still my own fate which touches me most pleasurably. What in normal conditions would strike me as palliating circumstances plunge me into gloom today. I'm not just miserable, I'm a miserable wretch. It's no use my telling myself that Esnault's calvados is lowering; not all spiritual conditions have their origins in the liver. The helmet of care has fallen on to my head and over my eyes. I wish that dawn would never come. . . .

Fouquet was sailing through the underworld on a river of perspiration when there was a knock at the door. Dragging oneself out of a coma, throwing off one's clothes and turning back the sheets are peculiar operations to perform when the sun is already high in the sky, for the sun had put in an appearance after a week of rain, and this would indeed be the great event of the day. Fouquet slipped into bed as he used to slip on to parade, just like an old sweat, and Marie-Jo, carrying the breakfast tray, found him entrenched behind the blankets, his face a sullen mask.

'Monsieur Gabriel hasn't closed the shutters,' she said.

'Monsieur Gabriel's got a funny look on his face this morning.'

She played stupid out of timidity, trying not to look at the negresses pinned naked to coloured paper - on the right, or on the left at Fouquet, who had a habit of uncovering himself to shock her. Everything disturbed her about this room, where she would linger nervously, her cheeks burning, one eye on the door, and panic lending her a certain brash impudence. Sometimes the young man tried to keep her talking for a while, enjoying her naïve and admiring familiarity, which enabled him to enter into the life of the house without coming face to face with M. Quentin, whose apparent indifference seemed to him to conceal an alarmingly keen insight into human nature. But on this particular morning, regarding the girl as one of several witnesses for the prosecution, he was peevish and short-tempered with her. She thought he was just joking, because he often indulged in a little broad humour with the maids.

'You've had a bad night, you have,' she said.

'You mean they're already talking about me?'

'About what?'

'I got back late last night,' he explained curtly. 'I know that I made a fool of myself. Monsieur Quentin saw me when I was pretty far gone, and he's probably still laughing at me. Just as I am, for that matter.'

Always make the first move, that was his policy. Claire often reproached him with talking too much about his drunken antics and joking about them with his friends, in a state half-way between anguish and laughter. She failed to recognize his behaviour for what it was: an implicit attempt at exorcism.

'Monsieur Quentin doesn't talk about things like that,' answered Marie-Jo. 'And he won't ever mention it to you,

either. Madame's different, but with him what's done is done. . . . Besides, from what I've heard, he knows what it's like!

But does anybody know what it's like? That vague movement inside the abyss is a solitary journey. Those who come up out of the chasm have looked for each other without ever meeting. Only the cruelty of the day brings together their errant flock. They come painfully back to life and turn round: night has obliterated every trace of their footsteps. Intoxication is contagious but incommunicable.

'You've seen him this morning,' said Fouquet. 'How is he?'

'I ought to be asking you that. He's just as he always is. Why, does he frighten you all that much?'

The chambermaid's pitying smile, her rather too well-ironed conscience, and this ludicrous question put in a secretive whisper as if it were a playground confidence, irritated Fouquet.

'If I'm afraid of anything, it's of having hurt him.'

This time she laughed openly.

'If you want to hurt him, you've only got to get up early . . . or go to bed late!'

'Yes, of course. I was forgetting. He isn't interested in other people. Not even you, I suppose? . . . Hasn't he ever . . . ?'

'Get along with you, Monsieur Fouquet! He's got more sense!'

'He's a sick man, isn't he? Because common sense is a kind of diet.'

'If he's a sick man, then that's the first I've heard of it! In the three years I've been here, he hasn't been ill once. The doctor doesn't come to this house.'

'I thought he did.'

'People just say that out of spite.'

'Why out of spite? It isn't a crime to be ill.'

Marie-Jo wasn't so sure about that. Brought up in the cow-shed, she tended to confuse health with virtue. Her rosy cheeks spoke in her favour.

'It's a punishment,' she said. 'I wouldn't like serving somebody who was ill.'

She retreated into the corridor, as if this conversation had spoilt her idea of a human life, which she pictured to herself as an apple: first the white blossom, then the round fruit, and finally the wrinkled skin. . . .

'Are you as busy as all that? Don't leave me just yet.'

'It's the shooting season,' she explained. 'There are parties all over the place. And then there's Mass too. Oh, I nearly forgot: there's some post for you, even if it is Sunday! You can't say I'm neglecting you, can you now? I found it in your pigeon-hole. You must have forgotten to look when you came in last night. . . . Now have your breakfast before it gets cold.'

The post had had plenty of time to get cold. Fouquet preferred it that way. Just as he rarely opened a letter without a lengthy preliminary examination, taking care to lose it in a pocket or a drawer if need be, he had asked M. Rozais to drop in on his concierge to collect and forward at reasonable intervals, what he regarded as a packet of annoyances. Lukewarm, they were much more digestible than if they had been piping hot. Distance and delay unprimed the weapons used against him. With ultimatums that had expired a week before and summonses that would only take effect a month later, the shooting party's fire always fell short or went over. Fouquet never felt that he had been hit.

Behind O'Neill's handwriting he could sense mounting impatience: 'I am sending you a lock of my hair, which is turning grey on your account. Impossible to get hold of



you. We are missing the boat with the autumn season. The curtain is going up and we have a living to earn. If I am expected to work with the Invisible Man, then we might as well call the whole thing off straight away. I give you till quarter day (a week ago!) to show some sign of life. I hate having to talk to you as if I owned you . . . , etc.'

Of course O'Neill owned him, but he was so very charming about it. He had asked Gabriel, for whom he had a tremendous admiration, to write the short publicity sketches which he was trying to put on in the Paris theatres in the interval, as a flesh-and-blood equivalent of cinema advertising. For reasons which were not immediately apparent, except perhaps to the lavatory attendants, the enterprise couldn't profit anybody except Fouquet and the small company of third-rate actors who were being tempted into signing on by the argument that this was a heaven-sent opportunity for them to tread the boards. O'Neill was spending a fortune on the idea, getting involved with a pack of painted actresses, and blindly following a road bristling with protested bills, at the end of which he imagined he could see a dazzling Canaan where the young people saw nothing but the Comédie-Française.

The second letter was from Mme Fouquet: 'Your guardian keeps your activities wrapped in mystery, but I would rather you wrapped your arms round your mother rather more often. To console me for this neglect, Rogeais took me to the races the other day. Rather late in life for a first visit, but what a revelation! The jockeys are delightful. They remind me of our little Marie—the same size and the same high spirits. But these midgets brought me in some money, whereas your daughter costs me money. With my winnings from Le Tremblay, I was able to advance Gisèle part of her alimony for October which you haven't paid yet. I am going to Longchamp on Sunday to win the rest.

## A MONKEY IN WINTER

Why don't you bet on horses? It seems to me that a young man of your age, with all the responsibilities you have to shoulder, ought not to neglect any opportunity to improve his situation. It appears that you can do it by post (underlined). Think about it. Where are you, and who with? I hope you are in the company of a woman of your choice who doesn't entice you from your duties, which are (1) to take care of your health, and (2) to make money. If you need anything, let me know: I would stake a small sum in your name with the same fervour as I pray for you every night. You really do leave me to do everything, but that is my main reason for living . . . , etc.'

The last envelope, covered with erasures, bore a Tigreville postmark. Fouquet recognized Marie's shaky signature on this boomerang, which had returned to its point of departure to score a direct hit.

## THREE

A WHITE-GLOVED gendarme had just stationed himself at the crossroads as a sign that it was Sunday. From his bedroom window Fouquet looked down at this dummy of the law standing in the middle of the Place du 25 Juillet with scarecrow impassibility. Pedestrians and vehicles alike avoided him; only his shadow would go on circling round him until evening like the arrow of a sundial. When a deformed kepi stretched out towards the front of the hotel, it would be eleven o'clock and the bells would start ringing for Mass.

Fouquet, feeling weak and muzzy-headed, had flopped into the chair by his table. If he went back to bed, he wouldn't stir out of his room all day. In a case like this the experts recommend 'a hair of the dog that bit you', to establish continuity and link the past with future. Every one of these mornings is a re-education. Fouquet tried to do some work to avoid thinking about Marie's letter, which he hadn't opened yet and which he had slipped underneath the paper on which he was half-heartedly scribbling, freeing himself from one commitment in another, in accordance with a tried and trusted method.

'Draft sketch for twin publicity: underwear and detergent. On the stage we see Cardinal Richelieu listening attentively to a bearded Capuchin, instantly recognizable as the famous Father Joseph, who is whispering in his ear. Suddenly an athlete to end all athletes rushes out of the wings, wearing an immaculate pair of underpants (the fellow can be picked from the swarms of Apollos who go in for competitions at all the seaside resorts). A look of surprise and admiration from the Cardinal, who dismisses his usual counsellor with a wave of the hand, points to the athlete and tells the audience, "I thought my eminence was grey, but his has got ——— whiteness" (insert the name of the detergent). Note for Mr O'Neill: this is pretty poor and something will have to be done about the Cardinal's lines. You will tell me too that it could do with some women. . . .'

At this point the bells started ringing. Since his arrival at Tigreville, Fouquet had been to Mass every Sunday. It was a way of seeing Marie dressed in something else than a bathing costume; it was also a habit he had acquired when he had left Paris and gone abroad. The church was an embassy whose jurisdiction one acknowledged in spite of everything; a language was spoken there which one recognized as one's own; he could apply there for help and protection, register his contrition on the morning after the night before, and come out with an extended visa. But a visa for what? A visa to go on as before? One day he would crack up. In the meantime he got dressed in a hurry, stuffing Marie's letter into his pocket. Nothing is simple in life: the desire to know what was in the letter might take hold of him if he suddenly felt a little less unworthy of that knowledge.

M. Quentin didn't go to church on Sunday, but he didn't disapprove of those who did. Perhaps the first time he had raised his eyebrows on seeing a certain formality in Fouquet's appearance. Today he would say to himself, 'There's no

doubt about it, the fellow worships all the gods indiscriminately.' Fouquet hesitated half-way down the stairs when he saw him reading at his desk, wearing a pair of spectacles which jarred with his weatherbeaten face. He felt like explaining that what had happened the night before was just an accident, that his walks round Tigreville had other objectives in view, and pointing to an exemplary period of abstinence lasting three whole weeks. But that would be saying too much. He got to where Quentin was sitting and blurted out, 'I'm sorry about last night.' The other looked up in surprise, nodded his head with an approving: 'That's all right', and went back to his paper. That was all. Gabriel felt anything but relieved. When he got to the door he turned round and had another look at the mountain behind him, where he had been only a few moments before, and which had now returned to its clouds. Already he could make out no trace of that opening of intelligence, tenderness or contempt which he had doubtless just dreamed about. There wasn't a single crack to be seen in that block of stone. It was probably what Esnault sarcastically called a 'holier-than-thou attitude'.

The church, which had been patched up after the war and had nothing remarkable about it except its wounds, stood in the middle of a fork in the road, surrounded by brightly painted shops whose owners, with the pertinacity of the tide, replenished their window-displays every morning with objects recovered from immemorial caves: indescribable haberdashery, orthopaedic instruments, naval officers' gew-gaws. Apparently in summer the faithful overflowed on the square in front of the church. The padded door which closed on Fouquet's heels made a noise like a cork being taken out of a half-empty bottle. The nave was in darkness, the choir dimly lit; there was whispering everywhere, at the altar and in the bays. As usual, the Dillon Institute was

massed along the side-chapel dedicated to St Antony of Padua, the patron saint of hunt-the-slipper. Marie was wearing a tartan dress and kept kneeling down when everybody else was standing up. Fouquet stole alo, 3 under cover of the pillars, thinking of the Hindu princes, Hollywood stars and oil magnates who treated themselves to the pleasure of snatching their children from one continent to another. But this little Mass being scamped in a whisper was more reminiscent of some adventure of the Three Musketeers. Fouquet felt the folded envelope in his pocket and hankered after it in the darkness. He wondered if Marie's prayers were like a letter to Father Christmas or whether they were already taking on a contemplative form. 'Lord, grant her prayers. I have often spoken to you about her: she's my daughter. Well, now I should like you to meet her. She has very good references. We know one another, you and I, especially you. . . .' While the priest was giving communion, he surreptitiously opened the envelope. A rustling noise like chocolates being unwrapped in a theatre:

'Darling Daddy. I am writing to you from school. The monitors are nice to us, the boys and girls too, except for a girl called Monique. She has the curse, and a good thing too, there are some days when she can't go bathing. . . . I make the most of them. I am writing to you from school. I should be glad if you would come to see me and teach me to swim. I hope that the weather is fine in Paris and that your theatre is doing well. I should be glad if you would send me a present with some cigarettes inside. A thousand million kisses. . . .'

Nothing serious in fact, none of those truths which come out of children's mouths, none of those poisons which they carry without knowing it, nothing but a rather more cruel realization of the absurdity of life, that was what his daughter's letter brought Fouquet. All the same, a blush

came to his cheeks. 'If I appeared to her now,' he thought, 'the real presence would become intelligible to her, she would discover the power of a wish and would put me on a par with God: she summons me and I arrive.' He was all the more frightened of the position in which, in certain circumstances, tremendous power over others can place you, in that he had abused that position with Claire, with Gisèle, with other people too. To see and to know, without being seen or known, that was the guiding principle of a drunken, inconsiderate demiurge who no longer replied to prayers, letters or telephone calls. Without the worst possible bad faith, Fouquet tried to ascribe the lethargy which confined him to the marginal fulfilment of his duties to an ascetic trust in creation, combined with absolute humility on the part of the creature. He didn't really expect God to be taken in, but he put the idea forward just in case.

Among the boys, who were separated from the girls by monitors wearing correct little hats, a ray of sunshine marked out young François. He towered head and shoulders above his companions. Fouquet wondered what his parents were like, and installed himself in the other scale of the balance, on Marie's side, where everything seemed very light. The real God would perhaps take a sympathetic interest in this minutely important case of a child's happiness for which little provision had been made in the last few years. This boy François, who was well set up for his age, might almost have been Fouquet's own son, and the young man was surprised to find how close he felt to him, dressed in an almost identical suede jacket, and wished that his nose or ears or some other accessory would lend him the prestige of paternity. Yes, he might well belong to the same clan, but with a few more stripes on his sleeve all the same. What about Quentin, then? God knows he made enough fuss about his years of service, however much he pretended not

to care about anything. Fouquet's thoughts wandered off down evil paths where, with all the barriers removed, Quentin staggered along on his arm, belching like Vesuvius and roaring with laughter, paths where he in his turn was a devil to somebody else.

The Mass was over. It always finished faster than it began. Already the Dillon Institute was lining up at the end of the Avenue de l'Impératrice. It would move off when somebody had collected Aunt Victoria, who had been entrusted to the Thominet cake-shop with unlimited credit for the duration of the service. The founder's eighty years could no longer adapt themselves to the exiguity of the church's prayer-stools. Two of the children would be granted the doubtful privilege of helping the old lady's housekeeper with the climb up the Côte des Mouettes. On the square there were even fewer people than usual because of the shooting season. The local landowners' cars were being driven by jaunty young women wearing thick make-up. Fouquet was free to go back to his hotel bedroom: it was all over for today.

One should not go to public places and partake of the common cake if one's footsteps on the return journey are not supposed to find an echo. Fouquet was already half-way along the Rue Sinistrée when he recognized on the opposite pavement two girls he had noticed the previous Sundays without paying particular attention either to the haughty beauty of the one or the high spirits of the other. Pretending to be deep in conversation and adjusting their speed by means of brief probes into shop-windows, they were managing to keep pace with him. Ignorant though he was of this particular highway code, he saw in their behaviour a trick designed to attract his attention and show that he had attracted theirs. He took care not to reveal that he had



received the message but, once he had reached the Stella, continued beyond the Place du 25 Juillet and along the Paris road. He hadn't felt this kind of emotion for a long time. The heady wine that started flowing through his veins had the best of it for a few moments, scattering the last cobwebs of drunkenness and the pack of remorseful regrets. Life was still worth living if young girls took him for a young man. A virgin glance was enough to release the prince from the monstrous form in which he was imprisoned. As he entered this part of the town into which he had never ventured before, Fouquet became well-nigh handsome through the operation of a forgotten reflex. Self-control is not the product of those cumbersome machines we call the mind or the soul, it is the work of humble artisans; beauty is a matter of vaso-constriction and sphincters, Gabriel's beauty originating in the forge of his loins and rising to his eyes, filling out his lips on the way. The only effort he made, and the only thing that distinguished him from an animal, was an attempt to conceal the imbecility which came to the surface in the process.

They were probably between eighteen and twenty years old, both fair-haired with exceptionally slim waists. The more beautiful of the two was mounted on high heels which gave added roundness to her calves, while the other was wearing light sandals spangled with silver, the very sandals of Mercury. They took each other by the arm as they turned into the Chemin Grattepain, and their cheeks touched, their hair mingled, when they looked round to see if Fouquet was still following them. He heard them laugh and went on without seeing that he had just sacrificed in quick succession the newsagent's alibi, the post office alibi, and the rather less probable alibi of the police station. He was now walking along an isolated road between two rows of working-class houses whose occupants obviously lived on

their doorsteps and knew everything there was to know about one another; and he realized that unless he pretended to be visiting the dairy or the gasworks at the end of this cul-de-sac, there was no denying that he had shown his hand first. Putting on a show of admiring the somewhat restricted view, he noticed that he had never met these girls during the week, from which he deduced that they must work somewhere in the neighbourhood, probably at the dairy, and live in one of these houses, possibly under the same roof, though their tender complicity was not exactly that of a couple of sisters. And this was a pity in a way, for he felt reluctant to break up the partnership they formed in his mind, a partnership in which he sought an allegory of golden hearted youth rather than an object to be attained. 'What are you up to?' he gaily asked himself. 'You've got nothing to say to them and not much to do to them, or else so much that you'd better make a start straight away, seeing that you're an old man with no time to lose. I must make it clear to you once for all that at my age there's no such thing as friendship. . . . What's that I'm saying? I'm twenty years old, as you can see for yourself, and we're going to exchange photographs, and you'll write to me when I go off to my military service. Madeline will act as our letter-box, or Dominique, or Jacqueline. It will be a slow-moving intrigue that will make us tremble more than the most passionate kisses.'

And all of a sudden they disappeared, conjured away by one of the tiny gardens; some doors banged, but which ones? Carried along by his own impetus, Fouquet went on a little way, searching in vain for some sign of them, a belt or a ribbon hanging from a balcony, feminine trifles with which country girls reveal their presence at the window. But there was nothing to be seen except a facetious individual who appeared behind a lawnmower and looked him up and down. Having no desire to incur the buckshot of a father,

a brother or a touchy sweetheart, Fouquet turned back along the Chemin Grattépain, without any feeling of bitterness, for mystification was part of the game, perhaps even the most important part. It was only when he got back on the Paris road that he started wondering whether the man he had just seen wasn't the one who had picked him up with a laugh the night before.

'The opening of the hunting season? You don't need to tell me that,' Fouquet answered Mme Quentin, who had stopped at his table on her way through the dining-room. The excitement which had taken hold of him after Mass still hadn't subsided, and now that the opportunity had passed he blithely reproached himself for not having accosted those two quails: scoring a hit wasn't the same as bringing them in.

'I was saying,' Suzanne Quentin went on, 'that you ought to take some exercise, because you aren't eating anything. Now if you were my son . . .'

He had spent the last few minutes listening patiently to remarks about his sickly appearance, reproaches for which the only possible justification lay in rumours of what had happened that night. Yet he felt certain that Quentin hadn't talked, that it was precisely that reticence of his which gave him the leaden face of a man to whom one couldn't help feeling answerable, an insufferable face. Esnault was mistaken: Quentin didn't sit in judgment on other people: he was just a silent witness, all the more embarrassing in that he had been in the same boat at one time, that he was a traitor in fact, the extent of whose information remained unknown and whose movements were unpredictable. Another fact, scarcely less irritating than the first, was that he probably didn't care.

'I drink too much,' Fouquet said bluntly. 'I drank too much last night. I don't know how to stop.'

'You ought not to start,' she replied, eyeing the bottle in front of him. 'But you can stop if you really want to.'

'You're arguing against your own interest.'

'My chief interest is the health of my guests.'

'Then you ought to open a sanatorium. Your husband didn't say anything to you?'

She looked uncomfortable.

'No,' she said. 'He just told me you'd had a long natter. He knows I get worried about that sort of thing.'

'I hope you won't hold it against me.'

'Oh, I wasn't talking about you.'

Then who was she talking about? Fouquet realized that he had just committed an act of treachery in suggesting to Suzanne that Quentin was still capable of hiding the truth from her, and the idea rather appealed to him. As if she had understood the danger of going on with this conversation, Mme Quentin broke off with a somewhat forced smile, and her place was soon taken by Marie-Jo.

'Well?' the girl asked. 'Everything all right?'

She had exchanged the white overall she wore every morning for a lace apron pinned to a black blouse through which could be seen a complicated network of straps and braces. The idea occurred to Fouquet that underneath all she might be a virgin; not that his chastity had been much of a burden to him for some time.

'No,' he replied. 'Everything isn't all right.'

'Pretend it is.'

'That's what I do all the time, but I'm not getting any younger.'

'Perhaps you spend too much time thinking about little girls.'

'What makes you say that?'

'My friend says she's seen you hanging around the Dillon Institute.'

'Well, that caps everything. My hosts take me for a drunkard and the maids take me for a satyr.'

'Oh, as long as nobody starts complaining,' she said with a laugh.

'Dear Marie-Jo, seeing that it's Sunday, I'm going to let you into a secret: I've got a daughter of thirteen.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't believe you.'

'All right, don't believe me, if you don't want to. . . . And now back to the kitchen with you. All these people are starving.'

'Even you?'

'Except me. I said: all these people . . .'

She glanced round the room.

'Oh, this is nothing. You ought to see it next week, on All Saints' Day. What with all the dead we've got buried round here, we're kept on the hop all the time. . . . There's even Americans come here! If you like, you can have your meals on your own.'

'I've got nothing against Americans,' Fouquet said absentmindedly. 'But do you know who these people are who have just come in?'

'They're the people who booked tables.'

'I can see that,' he said, as the newcomers started noisily straightening the chairs which had been tipped up to reserve half a dozen places. 'They're well organized, whoever they are. Are they together?'

'I don't think so. The people with the young lady run a garage at Domfront; the others, with the boy, I just don't know. Are you all that interested in them?'

'I'm willing to bet that inside an hour they'll be having coffee at the same table . . . that is, if they haven't already had a drink or been to the cake-shop together.'

'This isn't love, this is passion,' said Marie-Jo, taking his menu.

'Yes, it's passion all right.'

If he had wanted to see François's parents, then his wish was granted. The father, who was presumably about the same age as Fouquet, looked ten years older, a handicap which lightly armoured fantasy allows the heavy tanks of realism and which it never makes up, ten years well spent in making a niche for yourself in life, ten years which enable you to meet your former schoolmates with impunity; he had a jacket cut on the latest lines, rimless spectacles, an unlined forehead underneath a crew cut, and a suspicion of a paunch kept under control by regular games of tennis, which said all there was to be said about him. He could let himself go in the company of the young-looking mother by his side, who was obviously thankful to have escaped the usual discrepancy in age which makes some wives in their late thirties look as if they had brought their husbands into the world. No, this father who gave every crayfish a thorough-going medical examination before eating it was certainly no youngster.

As for Monique's father—for there could be no doubt that the gangling girl who had been smoking in the block-house the other day was Monique, just as it was easy to see that she was old enough to have 'the curse' from the f'empse the opening in her sweater afforded of a structure less imposing than Marie-Jo's—he was the provincial equivalent of François's father. He even belonged to a less extensive if not positively restricted society, which enjoyed the privilege of showing itself off in the exclusive circle of Domfront, at the garden parties and driving rallies, as well as in the self-evident increase in its annual turnover. His wife, the perfect accessory, conjugated the verb 'to have' and outdid her husband in animal vitality.

The children, sitting some distance from one another were not insensitive to the tacit harmony existing between the two families, in which Marie and Fouquet would have

been as out of place as a couple of gipsies, and encouraged the first currents of mutual interest which had been set up by singing each other's praises. Sooner than they expected, contact was made with the word 'cholesterol' and established on a firm footing with the word 'canasta'. The two tables drew together. Fouquet felt more keenly than ever the lack of someone else at his own.

A man eating by himself is a sorry sight; he is totally lacking in self-assurance, now furtive, now complacent, and all too liable to turn finicky. Since he had begun having his meals at the Stella, Fouquet had tried to avoid the favourite rites of bachelordom, the crumb-fingering mannerisms which he saw greedy, meticulous commercial travellers repeating with touching, almost obscene fidelity. The few women who had their meals on their own showed what real indifference was like, scamping the formalities, cutting out the embellishments, behaving like true travellers, but he did his best not to look at them for fear of spoiling such a natural function. On the other hand, he was always wounded by the sight of a couple preparing for that ceremony whose courteous enactment reminded him that people were not destined to spend their lives opposite an empty chair. Not to mention the joyous children watching their fathers filling their capacious, well-stocked pelican beaks in front of them.

Crayfish for two, duck for two, rooms for two, beds for two . . . the universe was planned with a view to everything being shared. But it was at table that this became most apparent, where no fingers brushed against his to take bread and salt, and where a fan-shaped bunch of flowers failed to mask the absence of a smile. That was where Marie should have been sitting today; that was where Claire should have been sitting every other day. For he wasn't so good a father that the appetite for happiness received didn't surpass the appetite for happiness rendered.

In spite of everything he remained very much cut off from the family picture which he had before his eyes and didn't doubt that Marie herself would have felt a certain humility at the comparison between their tête-à-tête and the warm gaiety in which her schoolmates were revelling. These then were the joys of which he had once been assured, which he had never obtained, and of which these young families were blandly showing him the fair copy. However mediocre the values on which they were based might seem to him, they found their justification in the happiness of these two children.

Fouquet started daydreaming. 'Go and play with them!' 'I don't want to leave you on your own.' 'Oh, I'll probably come along too in a few minutes to enjoy myself with the parents. That is, if they ask me. . . .' Marie had tears in her eyes; did she understand that her father and mother didn't follow quite the same rules as the other parents? 'Get along with you!' She went, and the beginning of the afternoon was a slow torture for them both that tore them limb from limb. . . .

'Hell!' said Fouquet. 'Let's get moving!'

François and Monique had got up from table and had asked permission to go into the garden, which permission had been granted with a unanimous smile. Fouquet decided that his daughter was beginning to lose too many points in this game and that it was time to intervene. Going up to his room to watch the children from his window—and this was becoming something of a mania with him, a mania ascribable to solitude, like listening through walls—he suddenly realized that he wasn't entirely alone, since M. Quentin was there with his long-standing experience of youthful errors, his extinct passion, his China Wall which they would end up some day by making him cross one way or the other.



Marie-Jo had found time to restore a little order to his room wherever she had the right to do so. Through the open window, the sea seemed darker under the pale sun, as if it had been bronzed. Fouquet felt how accustomed he had grown to this little room and how easy it was to settle down in it. The fact that he wouldn't be staying here for ever added a superfluous sadness to the weariness dating back to the previous night. Beneath him, close to the flight of steps, François and Monique were deciphering the marble tablet commemorating the death of the Canadian soldier.

'Is he buried here?'

'Of course not! His parents came and collected him. All the same, there'll be piles of flowers here next Sunday. I shan't be here to see them, because I'm off on Saturday. We're going to Domfront first of all, and then on to Bagnoles-de-l'Orne. Just think of it: three days' holiday!'

'I'm taking the train to Paris by myself.'

'The same train as Marie Fouquet?'

'I don't think she's going away. They say her father doesn't live with her mother any more.'

'Nor do quite a few film stars, but that doesn't stop their children from going away on holiday.'

'It isn't the same.'

'No, I know it isn't.'

'And why shouldn't it be the same?' Fouquet angrily asked himself, blaming himself for all the frustrations his daughter was suffering. Even the Canadian soldier's parents had taken their child away so that he didn't have to spend All Saints' Day at Tigreville. He decided that he was going to ask M. Rogeais to send Gisèle some money, together with a letter, posted in Paris, in which Gabriel would insist on her letting Marie take that wonderful Saturday train whose cinders never make you cry, explaining that he would pay all the expenses, that this was a sort of present they were

giving each other. Of course, he might be kept away by his work or even have to leave Paris during those few days; Gisèle wouldn't understand this endurance test, which she would consider a mere caprice, but she would agree to it so as not to repulse the slightest gesture of reconciliation made by this elusive paterfamilias.

After shutting the window, Fouquet sat down at his table and picked up a sheet of paper. He ought to have done this long ago, but the awareness of the peculiarity of his position had shut him up at the centre of a system in which Marie remained in the realm of the abstract, which is that of ideas, not gestures. When he saw her rushing down the beach in her shapeless, old-fashioned pullover, it was an extension of himself that was running to the water's edge, and when he felt that fate had treated her harshly, it wasn't for her that his heart bled, but for himself. The paternal heart-string which serves to knit new pullovers, to anticipate desires, to guess secrets in order to respect them, which is abnegation and expects no return, and which doesn't create the child in its own image, was reduced in him to the string of a violin stirred by its own echo.

'My darling little girl. I am entrusting this letter to a friend of mine who has to go to Tigreville: He probably won't have time to go and see you to give you what is almost a piece of good news: your Mummy and I are going to try to arrange for you to come to Paris next Saturday for the holidays. Write to your mother to say that you would like this. That will encourage her to go on with our plan. She is sure to agree to it: after all, three good nights at home are worth the trouble of a journey like that! There are sure to be friends of yours taking the same train. We will ask the headmistress to put you with them. Without getting too excited about it, cherish this little dream and open this parcel. I have received your sweet letter, but I don't want to

send you any cigarettes, which would only get you kept in over the holidays. Besides, little girls who smoke cigarettes never get married; they become music teachers or worse. Work as much as you play and I shall kiss you as much as I love you. Your Daddy, Gabriel.'

Fouquet went out of the hotel, taking care that neither of the Quentins spoke to him by name within earshot of François and Monique, who were rummaging about in their parents' cars. The town had emptied, and he was afraid that he might not find any shops open. Behind the padlocked grille of the shop *Aux Dames du Calvados*, a little wax girl gave him a frozen, absent-minded smile; she was wearing a woollen jacket which might have done for Marie, but there was no way in which he could transfer this garment from one prisoner to the other. The rest, glimpsed between the bars of the iron curtain, was cheap and skimpy, without even that exuberance in the way of colour which can take in the layman. He had to go back towards the church. There, like those old people who doze all day and lie awake all night, stores which did scarcely any business during the week never closed their doors on Sunday. A bearded man in a grey overall greeted him without any great enthusiasm from a doorway cluttered up with piles of lingerie, scent bottles and feminine requisites, which gave him the appearance of another Landru selling off the belongings of the wives he had pounded to dust in his stove. He turned friendlier when Fouquet assured him that he wasn't looking for a pair of blue jeans.

'A little girl,' he said, 'a little girl. . . . I haven't stocked anything for little girls for a long time. Thirteen, you say: big for her age, or small?'

'Small, I should say, but I'm no expert in these matters.'

'I may just possibly have what you're looking for. It isn't a new line, of course.'

He disappeared into the shadows from which Fouquet, preparing an apologetic curtain-line, steeled himself to see some appalling rags emerge. After a rather long interval, the man reappeared holding a pole with a pullover on a cardboard hanger dangling from one end, which he lowered before his customer as if it were the banner of some mysterious confraternity.

'Here it is,' he said. 'It's not as young as it used to be.'

As far as Fouquet could see, it dated back to the years immediately after the First World War, but the material had worn wonderfully well and was still soft and downy, while the style, satisfying the cyclical decrees of fashion, was surprisingly up to date.

'It's a museum piece,' he said.

'Oh, I'll let you have it cheap,' the other replied, misunderstanding the remark. 'You can see that it's never been worn.'

'I should hope not.'

'There's quite a story attached to that sweater. Puppy Schneider had it made to measure for her. You're too young to have known Puppy; she was a terribly elegant dwarf, German by nationality. Sir Walter Krushtein, who'd seen her performing in some music-hall or other, had **fall** in love with her and trailed her around with him, from Nice to Deauville, wherever there was a bank to be broken. He'd bought her a house at Tigreville that you could see to this day if it hadn't been demolished . . . no, I know what I'm talking about: it was where there's a miniature golf course now. You can see I'm not spinning you a yarn. . . . The gossip columns were always full of Puppy; I mean to say, a dwarf like that was news. And then, one fine day, Sir Walter started losing at the tables and he had to sell everything he had to pay his debts. He probably had to get rid of Puppy at the same time; anyway she never asked for the

sweater to be delivered. And she'd had it designed by the greatest artists of the time, the Nogues, the Dauzerals, the Guittoneaus, the really big names. . . . Why, it would cost a fortune today if you ordered it from a Collot or a Sorokine, to mention only the craftsmen, the pearls of French industry.'

'Well,' said Fouquet, 'if you're prepared to swear that the lady in question never wore the thing, I'm prepared to buy it . . . but only on condition that you deliver it to the Dillon Institute, with these chocolates and this letter, all in the same parcel.'

'Yes, I can do that. I'll send somebody tomorrow morning; you see, I can't get away myself.'

'Look, it's for a little girl who's spending Sunday at school. I'd like her to have her present by this evening.'

'But, my dear sir, there's nobody left at the Dillon Institute today: I saw them all getting into the coach with Mademoiselle Solange. They were off to see the Bayeux tapestry, and they won't be back before tonight.'

'In that case, I've got plenty of time to go there myself,' said Fouquet.

He knew that kind of excursion, a diversion imposed on boarders whose parents didn't come to see them, in which the children were confronted with further evidence of their isolation and saw historic buildings as nothing more than great black stones marking their holidays. For Marie, this pleasant outing was an exile in more than one respect, since it separated her from the object of her childish affection. He tucked the sweater under his arm and set off on the road to the Côte des Mouettes.

Fouquet's original intention had been to entrust his parcel to somebody at the school and then make off. But when he found himself in front of the big house standing on its own in its spacious grounds, absolutely quiet at this time

of day, and somewhat reminiscent of a stud-farm with its white gates and thatched outbuildings, he couldn't resist the temptation to get to know the setting in which Marie was growing up a little better. The bell that announced the arrival of visitors and playtime alike brought out under the porch projecting like a peaked cap over the main entrance a sort of red-faced nurse to whom he explained the purpose of his visit.

'Well, that's wonderful!' said the good woman, speaking with a pronounced Burgundy accent. 'I was beginning to think that everybody had forgotten poor little Fouquet. It's true that most of the other children live round here, so it's easier for their families.'

'That's why I should have liked to see her,' said Gabriel. 'But since she isn't here, could I have a look at the school so that I can tell her parents what it's like? I can assure you that my first impression is extremely favourable.'

'I'd be glad to show you round, but I ought to warn you that I don't really belong to the school. I'm here to look after the founder, the elder Mademoiselle Dillon, but I just love the little ones! . . . If you could see Mademoiselle Victoria, you'd understand. . . . They're like a breath of fresh air, those children. If it wasn't for them, I'd go out of my mind, living here.'

'What you say is rather worrying.'

'Oh, there's nothing to worry about. Everything here is just as it should be: the food is perfect, the air is healthy, and it's more comfortable here than it would be anywhere else. . . . It's just me. . . . Why, do you know what I was doing when you rang the bell? . . . Well, I'll tell you: I was taking advantage of Mademoiselle's siesta to work at my English! *Into the valley of death rode the six hundred*. I'm rising sixty, Monsieur; I've spent ten years nursing General Marvier, the hero of Ambez Spit, who was suffering from a

paroxymal orchitis; I've closed the eyes of a senator of the Côte-d'Or, my part of the world; and I can claim without exaggeration that it was my nursing that enabled the great Magda Colombini to return to the stage. . . . Well, for all that, I've never had so much trouble as I'm having now with Mademoiselle Victoria. It's only when she's at Thominet's that I get a little peace and quiet. She eats twenty-two thousand francs' worth of cakes there every month; I know that because I've seen the quarterly account they send us. But it's cheap at the price, just to have a rest from those sentences of hers I'm always getting wrong, and the fear of misunderstanding her and committing what the grammar-book would call a solecism. . . . The pity of it is that she isn't a bad sort; she's very sweet and reasonable, and people who used to know her before can't believe it's the same person. Only . . .'

While talking she had led Fouquet through the three classrooms, each of which was equipped for about a dozen pupils, which made up the school. Marie was in the 'middle form'. Her classroom, where she worked at a big common table, looked more like a billiard-room; her bedroom, which she shared with five other girls, looked out on to a mass of foliage. He thought it augured well for the rest of her life that she was the captain of this dormitory, responsible for seeing that it was kept clean and tidy, and hoped she had told her mother. He was on the point of leaving his parcel on her bed when the Burgundian stopped him: everything that came in to the school from outside, like everything that went out, had to be submitted to the headmistress's censorship, a kindly check whose only purpose was to turn the Dillon Institute into a house of glass. Just, then, a little voice in the distance, coming from the other wing of the building, started yelping in English, '*Hullo, Georgette. . . . What is happening? I don't like being left alone! What is happening?*'

'Only, as I was saying,' the Burgundian went on, 'there always comes a time when it starts all over again and you've just got to grin and bear it. . . . Excuse me a moment.'

Fouquet took the opportunity to cross out the reference to cigarettes in his letter and went over to Marie's corner of the room. Her iron wardrobe, her chest of drawers and her little trunk were all locked; nothing personal was visible which would have allowed him to say, 'This is where she lives', and tempted him to linger. The feeling produced by the six little beds was of a more subtle order, calling for the same evocatory effort one makes standing by a tomb; the soul was hidden from sight under that neatly folded packet, but it was there for all that.

A hand touched his shoulder.

'Come this way,' said the Burgundian. 'She wants to see you.'

And in the corridor she added:

'Be careful what you say. She still understands French.'

The old lady was extremely, inexorably old. She had covered her tracks with considerable skill. It was useless for Fouquet to try and imagine her as the young amazon who, so it was said, had ridden in gymkhanas. The face was that of an Indian squaw, born a centenarian, with enormous, withered hands clutching a tartan blanket draped round her shoulders. On a tray attached to her bath-chair, a collection of medicine bottles and prescriptions, a bag of sweets, a crucifix and a pack of cards, all emergency requisites, showed that for all her yelping and bell-ringing, Victoria Dillon didn't count on anything from anybody and was grimly determined to paddle her own canoe.

'Take a sweet,' she said in English to Fouquet, holding out a bag of caramels. 'Are you the father of Mary Fookett?'

The Burgundian glanced at the young man to see if he had understood.



'No, Mademoiselle,' she said in French. 'I've already told you that Monsieur is a friend of the family.'

The old lady promptly withdrew the caramels.

*'Looking out of my window, I saw you coming out of the church this morning,'* she went on, *'and I have seen you in several places these last few days.'*

The nurse translated this for Fouquet's benefit.

'She must be thinking of somebody else.'

*'You can speak directly to me.'*

'Marie's parents have asked me to give her this parcel,' he said. 'And here's a letter for the child too.'

Victoria Dillon stretched out an imperious arm towards the envelope, opened it slowly with an air of utter detachment, and suddenly dropped everything.

*'Georgette! We must go to the chemist's immediately. . . .'*

The Burgundian translated this edict into French.

'The chemist's?' said Fouquet. 'Is she feeling ill?'

'No,' said the nurse, 'but she's got very poor sight, and as she can scarcely make head or tail of people's handwriting, she goes to the chemist's to have her correspondence read out to her. It works awfully well with doctors!'

'This letter can wait,' said Fouquet. 'Besides, it's addressed to Marie, and there's no reason whatever why her correspondence should be hawked round chemists' shops.'

There followed a fantastic conversation in which Fouquet lost his footing several times, led astray by the nurse's translations and feeling as if he were throwing balls at a wall which sent them hurtling into the opposite corner of the room. He gathered that divorce was a calamity, but that all the same they couldn't complain about the weather they had had that summer. His temper started fraying and he soon broke off.

'You can't say I didn't warn you,' said the nurse as she was showing him out.

'But tell me, is she English or isn't she?'

'She's as French as they make 'em, except I suppose for a bit of English blood from her grandmother Hammerless. No, she's just old and capricious, and they found out too late to do anything about it.'

A spoilt adolescent at the end of the last century, Victoria Dillon had enjoyed all the advantages available to a girl from a well-to-do middle-class home. Her anglophile family had sent her to England at an early age, surrounding her first with young English ladies and then with young English gentlemen. It had been a sheer waste of time: Victoria had consistently refused to pronounce a single word of English, repulsing one after the other the Oxonians and Cantabrians who were attracted by her austere beauty, though no one could decide whether this was childish obstinacy, arrogant nationalism or coquettish affection on her part. Eventually it had been recognized that these were her private flower-beds, where nobody had ventured to dig for many a long year. And then, one fine day, old age had made it necessary for her to have a companion living with her. Victoria was to end her days as she had begun them, in the care of another nanny, another spinster in a white blouse who would watch over her every moment with solicitous authority, but this time a Burgundian with an established reputation was chosen to look after her.

'And do you know what she did then? She started talking English, nothing but English, to more and more people, so that finally I had to learn the beastly language myself to be able to take care of her. And it isn't something you can get off in five minutes either, worse luck! I keep telling myself it will come in useful somewhere else, but all the same I can't help thinking it's rank malice on the part of somebody so well educated as she is. Don't you agree?'

Malice? Perhaps. But one also had to take into account a

nostalgic longing for the green years awakened by this last governess, regret for wasted opportunities, and a frenzied desire to squander, before closing time, the vast, mysterious capital accumulated in the course of a lifetime.

Coming out of the Dillon Institute, Fouquet felt in no hurry to go back to the Stella. He continued uphill so as not to lose touch with the trees, whose advances he had ignored for so long: muscular beeches and strapping oaks which had known Hammerless and Marie and gave him an immemorial slap on the back. On the left, the Persigny grove linked the countryside with the municipal park. It was a tame little wood with clumps of shrubs cut into rose shapes and narrow corridors of greenery where lovers jostled one another like the frantic balls in a fruit-machine. Daylight didn't succeed in restoring all its original innocence; the passers-by, walking more slowly than they did elsewhere, seemed to be familiar with their surroundings. Fouquet sat down on a bench. He might have imagined himself to be almost anywhere if the sea, visible above the shimmering roofs, hadn't already been reflected in the sky.

Before he could adjust his mood to his latest experience, he recognized the silver sandals. They came straight at him and took him by surprise. He didn't think of turning his eyes away; it was one of the two girls he had followed that morning, surfacing again like a diver. She wasn't the prettier of the two; indeed she wasn't pretty at all but just amusing, as he saw when she passed in front of him, suddenly quickening her step and giving him a sidelong glance that was almost a smile. But his warning system none the less set Fouquet's blood moving. Then he composed himself once more. Instinct went back to sleep.

Like the whale, the village beauty has her pilot fish, a lively, ugly little creature attached to her person which

guides her through her adventures. If exuberant, it sets off her discretion; if mischievous, her reserve; if venturesome, her indifference. One might call this small fry a confidante, but there is more movement than talk involved; its chief justification lies in its presence: at once chaperone and radar, it gives both protection and warning, Fouquet's instinct told him that when it could be seen swimming around, the big fish wasn't far away.

Within five minutes, in fact, the girl reappeared with her companion in tow. Fouquet's heart beat faster. The creature was a magnificent specimen. He had never been so close to her before. The icy assurance of her carriage and expression, which revealed only the barest possibility of tenderness when she turned towards her friend, was of the very finest quality. He meditated briefly on the subject of breeding, or class as they call it in sporting circles, while they walked round one of the pools. For his part, Fouquet didn't budge from his bench, knowing that he was in the stronger position; it was they who, by coming to look for him, were committing themselves. They went past him a second time without paying the slightest attention to him, and without any change in their bearing or pause in their conversation before making for the grove. Fouquet deliberately gave them a start, though he thought that they might at least have looked round before disappearing. They hadn't bitten properly yet. Now there wasn't a moment to lose. It was no use just following stupidly in their footsteps; he must cut them off, as if by accident, much further on. He could visualize the plan of Tigreville clearly enough to see that his best chance would be at the point where the Rue Grainetière crossed the Rue des Bains. The excitement that filled him as he set off after the two youngsters amused him and saddened him at the same time; being a paterfamilias isn't an excuse for everything.

He had scarcely got to the site of his ambush before he caught sight of the silver sandals further up the hill. He planted himself in front of a letter-box and pretended to be absorbed in a study of the times of collections, holding the letter for O'Neill so that it was clearly visible, a man above suspicion. He felt sure that his trap would work, and was determined not to give himself away by so much as the twitch of an eyelid. In a city like Paris, where it was impossible to turn the terrain to one's own advantage, to come to terms with the local topography, to plan one's strategy over terrain that was constantly changing character, it would have been time to speak up; here, it was sufficient to appear at a given spot; movements were eloquent enough, and an ambush meant more than a rendezvous to both the hunter and the hunted.

This time, Fouquet had a feeling in his back that they were looking straight at him. They were already only a few yards away, hesitating at the crossroads for fear of losing their pursuer. He might make a pretence of going whichever way he pleased; in point of fact he was following the route they mapped out for him; later on, he would expect to be pursued in his turn, in accordance with the rules of this kind of ambulatory flirtation. Reassured, they turned into the Rue Fiduciaire, which joined the Boulevard Aristide Chany by the casino.

They walked a little way along the promenade, then took their shoes off and went down to the beach, arm-in-arm, keeping parallel to the sea, easy targets yet protected against any possibility of a surprise attack by their very isolation. They were playing the game as it ought to be played. A local boy or a vulgar brute would just copy them without realizing that they could turn round and walk past him, thus forcing him to carry on until he disappeared from sight or else drop his mask. Fouquet had no desire to venture into

open country and run the risk of finding himself alone with the two girls in that sandy desert. For mobile tactics he substituted positional tactics, settling down on the terrace of the *Rayon Vert*, a little bar at the front of the casino, as if this long walk had had no other object than to sit looking out to sea over a drink. So far he had been perfect, showing his hand quite openly, but without doing anything that could be interpreted as an admission; he had simply helped to produce certain coincidences. He felt that he was almost too good at this kind of embryonic and evasive manœuvring, in which intention exhausts action and truth lies only in the interpretation of events. From where he was sitting he had a view of the whole beach and would be able to see them coming back, scanning the horizon, anxious and uneasy. At least there was no reason why he shouldn't suppose so.

The barman, who was probably also the proprietor, started talking to him about the rain, just like Victoria Dillon.

'You mustn't let it get you down,' he said. 'There are some years when people come down for the weekend as late as November. It's the stormy weather we've been having these last few days that's kept them away. Trade's suffering, because sunshine is money for us. My wife looks after the canvas village in summer. You've no idea what a lot of good those English tourists did us, getting murdered in their caravans . . .'

Fouquet asked for a whisky, a choice dictated by the shoddy decor in which lifebelts evoked the idea not so much of a port of call as of first aid for the drowned. This hunter's drink stimulated him; he downed it in one gulp because the girls were already coming back. He had to be on his way before they set foot on the promenade; like that, three possible routes would be open to them: he would have taken one of those routes, and it would be up to them to decide

whether to go on with the game or to break it off. An animal that had been properly broken in ought to follow without any difficulty. Fouquet, who had turned into the Rue Hammerless-Dillon, invented a new way of walking, quick-paced but slow-moving, nonchalant but highly charged, the principal figure in the rustic ballet he was trying to improvise. Outside the tobacconist's, which he could use as a refuge if necessary, he glanced round to see if they were biting. They were biting all right. Now he was free to wander back to the Place du 25 Juillet in his own good time, happy in the knowledge that at the end of his line the two prisoners would henceforth follow in his wake. Embarrassment would only come upon them gradually.

Outside the Stella, Fouquet decided on a major operation: he let them come nearer and then went into the hotel. Like that they knew where to look for him in the future and could prowl round the place if the fancy took them. Quentin wasn't at the reception desk, and thus allowed him to rush upstairs to his room, bang the door and open the window, thus giving his address. Had they noticed? They were joking with the gendarme, presumably to gain time or camouflage their perplexity. Could Fouquet decently go out again straight away? After all, what was the point? . . . By the time he got downstairs they had vanished; the gendarme had folded his semaphore arms once more; it seemed as if nothing had happened; nothing had; life was peaceful: Fouquet had a feeling of relief, as at the end of a journey by air, when the plane's engine has stopped. His heart had fallen silent.

'All the same, Clausewitz won this sort of battle of the streets,' Fouquet told himself as he wandered round Tigreville in the gathering dusk, scanning every vista that opened in front of him, not in any spirit of enthusiasm but

simply as a matter of duty and with the cold interest of an infantryman who has been ordered to 'clean up' a district. Anything was better than staying in the hotel. Or, worse still, watching the garage-owners from Domfron enjoying themselves. The electric globes had lit up, summoning on to the pavement little groups of people in a hurry to breathe in a few last lungfuls of fresh air in each other's company. Fouquet moved from one group to the next, deceived as to silhouettes and colours by tricks of light. A few food shops had opened. He nearly missed seeing the two girls come out of the baker's with big loaves of bread under their arms, even the prettier one, who looked less imposing but more human as a result. It didn't escape his notice that their bearing was quite different, casual and unaffected, now they were unaware that they were being watched, and he no longer had any doubt that they had noticed him all day. Near the market they were stopped by some young men of their age and class, rugby players in all probability, who were very carefully dressed. In sleepy provincial towns it is the young people who introduce new fashions; youth, which is much the same everywhere, links these towns with the outside world. The girls joined the young sportsmen without a trace of embarrassment, and Fouquet felt a change of annoyance.

Having been unwise enough to come out into the open, he had to pass close to them to avoid giving the impression of avoiding them. From the shelter provided by the boys, the eyes which had refused to meet his all day now stared at him openly, insolently, sardonically. To keep himself in countenance, he fell back on to Esnault's bar, a panic reaction which he promptly regretted. No doubt he would have gone back there once or twice in any event to show that he was a man, though this probably wasn't the best way of doing it, whether you considered the question from the point of view



of timidity or from that of character, but he would have preferred to wait a little until time had wiped out the memory of that night.

He was stealing along in front of the café when he caught sight of Quentin. Standing at the bar, he was talking to Esnault, dominating him with the whole weight of his personality, his hands pressed flat on the counter, where they marked the boundaries of a great empty space. There was no glass in front of the two men, nothing but a dishcloth thrown down between them like a challenge. The other people in the bar, while pretending to be absorbed in their own conversations, were trying to catch the remarks which were being exchanged in an undertone: a joust in which sang-froid was opposed to cunning. Without knowing quite why, Fouquet had a feeling that it would be better for him not to go inside and, caught between two fires, he plunged into an even darker side-street. If the girls were still looking, they must have realized that his indifference towards them was no longer a mere affectation.

Not knowing where to go, he started automatically repeating the itinerary he had followed that afternoon, suddenly feeling a stranger to this town in which he thought he had taken root, an escapee from the net of habit in which he had allowed himself to be so thoroughly enmeshed. His presence at Tigreville had no meaning except in a well-ordered life; its only justification lay in a gradual convalescence in the shadow of little Marie, a convalescence which he had to prolong as far as he possibly could.

He had arrived within sight of the church, where the strains of a harmonium could often be heard while vague figures slipped inside by a back-door, their arms filled with flowers, and some of the stained-glass windows lit up. This evening the doors were closed, the square silent, and he felt a certain disappointment in consequence. Only Landru's

shop was still dimly lit. Against the light he could see him in the midst of his cardboard dummies hanging from the ceiling in their linen dresses, busy with some sinister inventory in which the dwarf, whom the sweater had recalled to his mind, probably had her place. Not wishing to be seen, he turned down the Rue aux Moules and made for the Stella.

Quentin hadn't got back yet. Mme Quentin, whom he met in the hall, asked him if he had seen her husband in the town. Fouquet gave an evasive answer. He didn't feel entirely easy in his mind either, and spurred on by curiosity as well, he pretended that he had forgotten something and went out again straight away to try and find out how the conversation at Esnault's was going.

Quentin wasn't there any more. Calm reigned around the panels on which the Tigreville Snipers' scores were posted. The coast was clear. Fouquet felt this so keenly that he couldn't help opening the door. An expression in which surprise and annoyance were combined appeared on Esnault's face. He crossed the room, greeted by two men with a nod of the head which brought no response from him.

'Well, old chap, you got in a hell of a state last night, and no mistake. . . . Feeling better now?'

He noticed that Esnault was using the familiar *tu* form of address with him. After an initial feeling of revulsion, he told himself that after all it was a long time since that had last happened to him and that it did you good. Perhaps he had been wrong to attribute so much importance to what had happened the previous night. In the mirror he saw the lovers in the street starting their rounds again, joined in all probability by the two girls from the Chemin Grattépain, but he felt outside it all, somewhere where one eagerly pondered the great problems of life and went one's own way to the very root of things.

'What are you having? . . . A laced beer like last night?'

A provocative laugh accompanied the offer. Fouquet could scarcely repress a shudder, but took up the challenge.

'The same as usual,' he replied. 'A laced beer. . . .'

'You're going to make yourself ill,' Esnault said in a sly voice while he was opening the bottles, 'and I'll be the one who's hauled over the coals again.'

The annoying thing was that Fouquet didn't know whether to use the *tu* form himself.

'Quentin came to see me,' Esnault added, as if it were a matter of no importance. 'As far as I could see, you haven't won your bet yet. . . .'

'My bet?'

'You swore you'd manage to get him to go on the booze again with you. You said, "I can weigh up big brutes like that at a glance; first of all I punish them with a few martinis; then I make them come at the cloth with five or six passes of something-or-other with mandarin-cu; and finally, all of a sudden, I give them the estocada with calvados . . ." Well?'

'That's right,' somebody said. 'I was there when he said it.'

He was there again, his bad teeth bared in a crenelated smile. And fat Simone was there too, rolling her liquid eyes like an American millionairess to whom Dominguin had just dedicated his next bull.

'Better men than you have come a cropper trying that on,' said the man with the lawnmower whom Fouquet had seen that morning in the Chemin Grattelain, and who for all he knew might be the father of the two girls.

Fouquet detected a note of spite in the atmosphere of collective excitement. They were waiting for him to perform the eighth labour of Hercules, in a provincial corrida with a matador from outside and the bills announc-

ing a fight between Theseus and Minotaur. There wasn't enough going on to keep people amused in this dead-alive hole. 'What a swine I am!' he thought. But then, why didn't he repudiate the wager, and why did he feel somehow that his perversity had an essential part to play in Quentin's destiny?

'What did he have to say to you?'

'That you'd been ill.'

'That isn't true.'

'Yes it is. . . . That he was responsible for you. . . . I must say that struck me as a bit peculiar, because he isn't the sort to worry his head about other people. You must have made quite a hit with him.'

'What's he doing poking his nose into my affairs?' Fouquet asked himself. After all, he was thirty-five, he was a man, he was free to do as he pleased. Quentin was making the same mistake as the others: he was putting Gabriel down as an alcoholic. If that classification was generally recognized, then he was done for and his last defence would come tumbling down. Claire, for all her strictures, accepted Fouquet's penchant in a way, giving it support, security, freedom of the city; what she ought to do was to deny its very existence. Meeting disapproval in Quentin, he felt that he was turning into a fraud again.

'Another laced beer, please.'

'Look!' grinned Esnault. 'Somebody's come to fetch you.'

Fouquet swung round just in time to see Quentin drifting slowly by, a solid ghost that had come nosing up against the walls of the aquarium.

'He didn't have the nerve to come in,' he said mirthlessly, almost regretfully.

For in his judge's eyes he had seen a look of anguished entreaty, not an envious look but a look rather like the one

he had met in Marie's eyes, one day out on the rocks, when she had guessed that François and Monique were smoking in the blockhouse and had felt excluded from their complicity. That discreet jealousy, reflected in that particular mirror, disturbed him.

'Perhaps he'd like nothing better than to be with us in here,' he said.

'We'd know if he did,' said Esnault. 'Proud as the devil, that man is. He's cut himself off from society, and good riddance I say. I can understand a chap not going to the pub; or rather, I can't understand it but I can accept it. Anybody who doesn't feel the need to find out how the rest of the world is getting on and mix with other people ought to be pitied, I reckon. But contracting out of the whole business, that's something I can't forgive. . . . Look, why don't you stay and help us eat a few birds our good friend Tourette's brought back from the shoot? They can be roasted the same day.'

The Tourette in question, a strapping fellow with a dead-white face and a bristling moustache of astonishing proportions, was a reassuring figure. Fouquet allowed himself to be persuaded, thinking that Quentin was wrong to raise a barrier between himself and the good things of life. What had he got to complain about, seeing that people went on inviting him to join in and he deliberately refused? In spite of his lack of appetite, Fouquet ate a lot, most of the time with his fingers, and drank even more, transfigured by the feast.

Late in the evening, he felt a twinge of conscience, a vague, uneasy feeling that Quentin—incredible though it might seem—was probably getting worried about him. He set off for the Stella in a bitter frame of mind, telling himself over and over again on the way back that he had once more become a sort of freeman of Tigreville.

On the ground-floor of the hotel, a light was still burning in the little reception office. Crossing the garden, he saw Quentin through the window, bent over his big books, like Gisèle in the old days, like Claire not so long ago . . . and the sight made an unbearable impression on him. He would have to resort to an explanation.

When he closed the door behind him, Quentin got up, ostentatiously shut his registers to show that he had been waiting for him, and said:

'I've got a very old bottle of cognac laid by. Would you care for a glass?'

## FOUR

**T** IRED of poring over his encyclopaedia in seventeen volumes, open at the article on Madrid and with the page turned down at the article on bulls, Quentin gazed vacantly at the young man in the Basque beret whose job it was to place the products manufactured by the monks of Saint-Wandrille Abbey. He was already a war veteran with a ribbon on his buttonhole, but he took a childish pleasure in the American-style car into which he piled his samples, and he described himself as a public relations officer. The travelling fraternity was no longer what it used to be in the days when the mountebanks of the commercial world would arrive by train in their seasonal migration, pitched camp at the hotel until they had scoured the district, and spent their evenings looking through the atlas of their vagrant lives, the episodes they recounted sometimes overlapping: a merry company whose stage was France itself. Their garrulity was that of old newshounds who have plundered the whole world, and they were at their happiest in the evening. Some of them used to sleep four to a room, furniture polish with stationery and agricultural machines with wrist-watches, so as to be able to spin out their

memories later into the night. Quentin secretly envied them and allowed them specially favourable rates. But the car had killed the table d'hôte. The new generations came and went in a flash, keeping themselves to themselves and scattering in every direction. Most of them found a means to get home at the weekend, and the 'representatives' room' remained empty more often than not. The only thing to be said in their favour was that they came frequently and regularly, appearing and disappearing at set times like the little figures in old clocks, though without the same whimsical vagaries. The man from Saint-Wandrille marked the last Wednesday in the month.

Suzanne had felt obliged to go to the hairdresser's, a Minerva with a helmet over her curlers, and in a few minutes she would take advantage of the darkness to steal home, keeping close to the walls, one hand over her head and the other pressed to her lips in an apologetic gesture. The little maids, pottering about between the office and the linen-room, smiled every time Quentin's eyes fell on them: Fouquet, whom they had dressed up in an apron, was in the process of turning the kitchen upside down. When the commercial traveller's car had disappeared, tearing apart a muslin curtain of rain, Quentin made his way unhurriedly towards the double doors fitted with portholes through which he could see the stoves and the cutting-boards.

Fouquet, standing at the big wooden table gashed by the cook's cutlass and stained by sauces and juices, was busy stoning olives. All around him, on countless dishes and plates, were various foodstuffs divided into basic materials and other ingredients. He had insisted on doing the shopping himself, asserting that close acquaintance with the different types of butter was as essential to the making of paupiette as skill in the culinary art. Old Jeanne, who had been sulky to begin with, was now following with interest this



extravagant form of cooking in which collops of veal were buttered with goose-liver paste.

'Rich paupiettes, not to say pretentious,' thought Quentin. 'An amateur's paupiettes. The boy's rather too free with his ingredients, a bit ostentatious, not so sure of himself in fact: he's got a double slice of Bayonne, and that's a mistake because he'll have a job to roll it up and tie it properly. . . . The truffles are no use at all; he's burning his diamonds. It's a nice touch, but pointless. . . . The quarters of orange indicate a paradoxical nature with a tendency to provocation. . . . But the best of it all is that he's been taken in by his own act; his movements are easy and natural; he's good at details; he's even good at certain elementary processes that you just can't improvise. . . .'

At that moment, Fouquet was slicing some Paris mushrooms in a bowl of vinegar water.

'Good!' Quentin added. 'If only we could cure him of his easy spices, we could make a really good sauce-cook out of him. I'd like to put him on to doing a stew if we had the time.'

He went into the kitchen and turned on all the lights, which were promptly reflected by the battery of the copper pans.

'You'll ruin your eyes like that,' he said.

Fouquet greeted him gaily with a wave of the hand and set to work again.

'The paupiette is a product of chiaroscuro art,' he retorted, 'dark on the outside and mother-of-pearl inside; by flooding my operative field with light, you run the risk of depriving me of my sense of nuance and gentle gradation. . . . As I think I told you before, I start with the olives, the black and the green set one inside the other. I roll them up in my collop lined with ham and liver paste; then I brown it over a fierce flame in my special butter mixed with thin strips of larding bacon; after that, I cover it and I

leave it on a modest flame before adding my Paris mushrooms, these few truffles, the rest of the olives. . . .

'And the quarters of orange?' asked Quentin.

'There, I'm in rather a fix. It was really for your benefit that I got them, to give the whole thing a touch of the Chinese. But I've a feeling that I'll find a use for them when it comes to the cooling down. And that reminds me: could you possibly spare me a drop of that wonderful brandy you let me taste the other evening?'

Quentin's face froze.

'You'll have to wait for my wife to get back, and ask her,' he said. 'She's the one who keeps the keys of the sanctuary.'

And he regretfully turned on his heel. He would have liked to share a little longer in the preparation of this meal they had chosen and the flavour of adventure which colours men's activities when they try their hands at women's work. The Navy, by teaching him laundering and sewing, had treated him more than kindly in this respect. He had even asked himself, in the old days, whether there might not be a touch of the homosexual somewhere inside him; a flood of alcohol had drowned the reply. But he undoubtedly had a vocation for corporative life which had never been satisfied in the company he had kept at Tigreville. Fouquet's behaviour, ever since his arrival, had been that of a raw recruit, and called for the solicitude of an old sweat, however great the respect the latter might feel for other people's personal freedom.

'All the same,' he told himself on the way to his office, 'there's no denying that I behaved like a lovesick schoolboy on Sunday. Going to see Esnault doesn't count; those swine try to get me often enough; they've never stopped hoping and waiting for me to give way; they think of me as somebody who's been castrated; they can't understand, they

never will understand, that's all in order and I'm paying the fixed price; and it's all to the good that I should go into town now and then to show them that I'm still around, even sober. They'll have put my visit down to professional jealousy, the rivalry of a couple of whores fighting in the street over a good customer: "Don't you go trying to abduct my minor!" But what I can't understand is that other jealousy, the only one that matters, that sickness I felt deep down inside when I saw him sitting with the locals and thought to myself, "He isn't even thinking about me; it's as if I didn't exist." And the idea that I didn't occupy even the smallest corner of that boy's mind, when I was so close to him, really hurt. When he got back here, I offered him some brandy; I went so far as to do that so that he wouldn't always go drinking somewhere else. I had lifted Suzanne's bunch of keys, running the risk of being caught stealing the jam, at my age! I know that it's no fun drinking on your own and that he'll go back to Esnault's. But at least that shook him; he has marked time for a while, and that has probably prevented him from starting one of those "novenas" I know only too well, in which you go from one blind to another; I've organized the danger. Once, I thought there was something he wanted to say to me, but then he changed his mind; he simply talked about his dinner with the local shots, without any sign of embarrassment—and after all, why should he be embarrassed?—indeed, it struck me that he was piling it on a bit, but I didn't care because at least he was telling me about it. . . .

That night, Quentin and Fouquet, trying to outdo each other in discretion, had in fact talked of nothing but cooking. The young man, excited by his evening, had offered to show what he was capable of with a veal paupiette, his speciality, so he maintained. Quentin had taken him at his word, considering this particular pastime to be a lesser evil. And now

this dish, which they were going to share with Suzanne, was stuffed with hidden meanings and abortive confidences.

Quentin put away his encyclopaedia: he had found nothing in it which could justify Fouquet's infatuation for Spain, that passionate enthusiasm which he had witnessed the other night. Admittedly there were certain names that sounded delightful, but he would have liked to see some colour photographs of the country, and bullfighting struck him as nothing but a form of butchery, once you had stripped it of the glamour of *Carmen*. Banderillas just made him think of hair-curlers, and hair-curlers of Suzanne. If banderillas were really those barbed sticks decorated with curling-papers which the encyclopaedia said were planted in the animal's hide to emphasize his faults when he charged, then Suzanne had indeed stuck a remarkable pair into him only the day before. He could still feel the stinging pain in the back of his neck and turned in fury on this unpleasant memory which he couldn't succeed in shaking off.

Suzanne had no religion other than that of clear-cut situations; she did not believe in God; her parents, separated from the Church by their isolation in the depths of the country and diverted from the practice of religion by age-old rural superstitions, had not taught her to refer to those supreme courts whose uncertain arbitration other people call upon to settle their conflicts. Of a gentle and for a long time undecided nature, she now investigated and judged every case herself in accordance with the code she had worked out in the course of living, a code in which good and evil were domestic criteria like heat and cold. This innocence of hers left nothing in the dark. She had come up to Quentin while he was drawing up the inventory of his cellar, not the inventory he used to make by candlelight of the black or bronze ingots which gave him the feeling that he possessed a little of the serum of the earth, but an October

list, which he entered into a school exercise-book after the wine-harvest, like one of those retired generals who go on manœuvring army corps by changing the positions of cards in a filing-cabinet: the Bechevelles had been decimated; the Pomerols needed reinforcements; the 1945 Haut-Brions would have to be recalled, and the 1957 Chambertins, young though they were, would have to be given mobilization orders. . . . Suzanne had bent over him a face which the stormy times had left unmarked, and had said:

'Albert, are you sure that you aren't keeping something from me?'

This gentle attack had opened a ten-year gulf between them.

'I could only keep from you something you were trying to find out,' he replied, turning the dullest of eyes on her.

Suzanne had just made her first mistake, by allowing her husband to perceive, beneath the absolute confidence which he attributed to her, ten years of watchful anxiety and suspicion.

'I've never had any doubts about you,' she said. 'I know that you're too dependable, too upright, too proud as well. Why didn't you tell me that you'd been to Esnault's? You hadn't set foot in the place for ages, so what made you go back?'

That did it! Quentin felt as if he had been bottled in his turn, in a squat flagon which this pale creature was being presumptuous enough to hold up to the light of her conscience.

'It was anger that took me there, not thirst,' he said. 'You can set your mind at rest.'

'I'm not worried.'

'You ought to be. "Go to Mass and you'll believe," isn't that what they say? Well, go to the pub and you'll drink. It's inevitable.'

'Monsieur Fouquet goes drinking at Esnault's,' she said.

'That's just what I've been telling you.'

'What are we to do?'

'Open up here. Give the café a quick once-over with a duster and start it going again.'

'You must be mad! We're out of practice after all these years . . . Albert, please don't let Fouquet influence you.'

'Fouquet has never asked me to reopen the bar; he enjoys himself more at Esnault's, you can be sure of that. And as for influencing me . . .'

'You know perfectly well what I mean: since he's been here, he's opened doors that we thought had been shut for good. Oh, it isn't his fault. It's almost as if we'd been waiting for him.'

'For that youngster?'

'Yes, for that youngster. Believe me, I don't want him to stop liking this hotel or us any more than you do. Because he has taken a liking to us, that's obvious. But we can't allow it to take us too far. We were so happy as we were.'

'It isn't taking us very far now,' said Quentin, recovering his sang-froid. 'Just to the point of eating some paupiettes.'

He had explained to her what Fouquet had proposed. Annoyed to begin with, Suzanne had finally decided that they couldn't possibly submit separately to the young man's cooking, and that on this occasion he would eat with them in their little dining-room. She too, in her own way, was organizing the danger; there is no other way of exorcizing the devil than by inviting him to one's table.

'The fact of the matter,' Quentin had said, 'is that we never talked about it, but you never stopped thinking about it.'

'Only at night, that I swear. I'd never have allowed myself to think about it during the day: this is the first time it's happened. At night, when everything's right with the

world and I hear you munching your sweets, I still wonder sometimes why you became so perfect all of a sudden and hope that it had something to do with me.'

'Oh, leave my sweets alone. I ought to be able to do without them, as I do without the rest; it's a habit.'

'It's a method.'

'I've got nothing left but habits.'

'Provided they aren't bad habits. . . .'

Having said all that she had to say, she had gone off feeling easier in her mind, sure that she had weakened the enemy enough to be able to show him with impunity the grin, unseeing back for which he had felt a momentary hatred.

'Now Fouquet hasn't any habits,' thought Quentin. 'Everything he does possesses the charm and the dignity of the provisional; he invents his route as he goes along. He reminds me of Dauger, that seaman who hadn't got a trade—who hadn't got a speciality, in fact, just like Fouquet if you don't count the paupiettes. Dauger was terrific in the bush with nothing but his instinct to guide him, while the rest of us were always being surrounded, for all our mastery of tactical problems. Habit is a good means of dying on the spot.'

In point of fact, Suzanne wasn't entirely wrong: for him Fouquet represented the temptation, not of drink, but of a less restricted life. Underneath his coarse exterior, he had always felt drawn to what was fine and delicate, and nothing was finer or more delicate in his eyes than the abstraction into which this unconstrained young man sometimes withdrew, his walks on the cliff, the dream of blood and satin into which his love for Spain would plunge him, the magnificent weakness which he derived from alcohol, the mystery of this personality of his which only asserted itself by stealing away. After Sunday, he had decided to follow Fouquet on one of his walks, keeping far enough behind

not to give himself away; he had seen him sit down among the rocks to watch the children playing on the beach, and he had recognized that vice could be appeased by the sight of innocence. The next day he had gone into his room on some plumbing pretext, not meaning to break into his privacy, but because it suddenly seemed to him that it was the only place in the house where he could breathe freely. There was also an element of defiance in his action, for it was soon after Suzanne had spoken to him. Finding nobody in, he had lingered for a little while, trying in spite of himself to discover in the brush or the comb, in a hollow in the pillow, in a few graffiti on the wall, even in the silent framework of the dressing-case, some sign of the passion and adventure which he knew occupied the room. This expedition would have left him with a taste of defeat if he hadn't already passed the stage and returned to the state of universal uncertainty in which one person watches another simply in order to ask for his life, in order to discover not so much the secret of that life but the recipe for living it. Very soon now, Fouquet's presence in the dining-room in which he had immured himself for the past ten years would bring confirmation that his period of emotion's self-sufficiency was at an end.

Fouquet wasn't as yet acquainted with this little room in which he had occasionally caught sight of Quentin through the half-open door, sitting in his shirtsleeves with his elbows on the table while Suzanne tried to arouse his interest with a long monologue which he listened to without any sign of impatience. As soon as he entered the room he noticed that there was no window, and experienced a sudden feeling of suffocation which wasn't a physical malaise but the impression that he was obtaining access to the innermost thoughts of the couple who lived there. This wall enclosing a set of



ebony furniture was indeed that of private life, which no gaze can penetrate unless it is summoned from within. Yet at first sight none of the intricacies and complexities of the soul were visible in the room, which looked rather like the makeshift cabin the captain of a ship has adjoining the bridge so that he can keep an eye on things even when he is resting, a bare cell in which everything has a purpose except for one personal possession, a medal or a mascot, a second compass, minute in comparison with the great steering compass, but which governs the course of a human heart. Here it was an out-of-date map of China and an amateur snap-shot, cracked and creased in a succession of wallets, in which a group of young men in singlets could be seen striking a field mortar on the banks of a muddy river. A barometer, a calendar, and a wad of bills transfixed on a curved hook completed the picture.

'This is my Fort Chabril,' said Quentin.

'We never entertain anybody,' Suzanne pointed out, 'except perhaps a member of the family now and then. In any case, entertain isn't the right word to use, since you've done absolutely everything.'

She was utterly bewildered by the way Fouquet kept bustling to and fro so as not to take his eyes off the paupiettes, and something in her orderly nature rebelled against this breakdown of protocol. On the other hand, Marie-Jo, who had just finished laying the table with the best cutlery, thoroughly approved of the young man's admission to the holy of holies and enjoyed seeing how all the movement between kitchen and headquarters had blown away the cobwebs of ceremonial. Fouquet himself, when he looked into the big dining-room of the hotel and saw a solitary customer sitting at his usual table, a picture of bored and absentminded anorexia, couldn't avoid a strange feeling of dissociation. Quentin had calmly installed himself in his

chair and was reading the newspapers while waiting on events to which it was unseemly to attribute overmuch importance, but the glances he kept shooting over the top of his paper showed that he was as nervous as if he carried the entire responsibility for those events.

'Your wife will be a lucky woman,' said Suzanne when Fouquet finally deposited the steaming stew-pan, wrapped in a professionally folded napkin, in the middle of the table.

As he went to sit down, Fouquet couldn't help looking at Quentin, and their eyes met. He gave a sad smile: through the performance of these familiar rites—'Be careful, I think I've left a bit of string here; you haven't got enough mushrooms'—Claire and Giséle answered the roll-call, came back to mind in a cloud of steam, and took their places at this table to which every scent, every taste, every allusion summoned them. . . . Though Heaven knows they weren't the kind of women to be tied down with paupiettes! He had proof of that. . . .

'Do you think women care as much as all that about this sort of thing? Look at the women who eat in your restaurant: they behave as if they were cars being serviced in a garage.'

'You're right,' said Quentin, 'most of them don't know anything about it. They may be wonderful at the kitchen stove because they're the natural repositories of everything to do with fire and water. But the woman who knows how to behave at table is a rare bird; which, when you come to think about it, is probably what makes her the best of all possible companions for man.'

'That may be the opinion of your Chinese books, but what I meant, Monsieur Fouquet, was that you can appreciate the intention that lies behind a dish, and that if Quentin had ever deigned to cook something just for me, I should have regarded it as a delightful compliment.'

'Monsieur Fouquet didn't cook this for you,' said Quentin, 'he did it for me. By the way, where are your oranges?'

'Oranges!' exclaimed Suzanne. 'Where are we off to now?'

'To China,' said Fouquet. 'You're right, I'd forgotten all about them.'

Those were good evenings when Fouquet used to cook his paupiettes; he felt thoroughly at home when Claire handed over the reins of her house to him; and then the friends who turned up, because friends always did, accredited them in the proper function of a couple, which is to shed radiance. Sometimes things degenerated later, but not before he had had time to say to himself, 'There are people worse off than us.'

'Of course,' Quentin went on, 'women are quite capable of seeing passion in a mutton stew provided they love the man who cooked it.'

'But when they stop seeing it or imagining it, does that mean they've stopped loving him?' asked Fouquet, turning to Suzanne.

'It means above all that they're looking for something else.'

'Yes, that's true,' said Fouquet. 'Women are capable of anything with one solitary exception. If we say "There are people worse off than us, than you, than me . . ." that's something men can usually understand, but women never. They are always aiming higher. I can assure you that in moments of depression I've tried to imagine the disgrace of a politician, the fears of a fugitive, the anxieties of the most contemptible of financiers, the misery of the humblest of wage-earners; in short, I've read the papers with the sole object of convincing myself that my fate was still an enviable one. But, women, who incidentally read the same papers as I do, look for their reference positions among the princesses, the models, the actresses, the divorcees with ten

million a month; in other words, they discover a new shop-window to lick in life every day. I'm not saying that's a bad thing; on the contrary, there's a germ of progress in that attitude without which we'd tend to feel satisfied with our mediocre lot. All the same . . .'

'There, young man,' said Quentin placidly, 'I think you're on the wrong tack, at least as far as we're concerned: you see, Madame Quentin has never had any other ambition than to make tomorrow follow the same pattern as today. And as for being satisfied with our lot, you disappoint me: I thought you would have liked to be a matador.'

'But I am a matador,' replied Fouquet, 'in my—how shall I put it—idle moments. . . .'

Suzanne didn't try very hard to understand the remarks the two men were exchanging. All that she knew for certain was that her husband had just paid homage to her in front of a stranger, and she felt grateful to him. It was perfectly true that she no longer expected to witness any of those transformation scenes which give people the illusion of extending their power over the world. She was one of those who preserve and consolidate. Just as she had shown patience and resignation in misfortune, so now she put her hope in the immutability of her days. Once perhaps, when Albert had stopped drinking, she had envisaged the possibility of setting off with him along those unknown roads of which the network of lines in the palm of her hand suggested the itinerary. But that was in the first flush of triumph. Suzanne had won the sort of victory that is enough for a lifetime. Since then all her efforts had been directed to making it even more worth while by turning her captive into a conqueror, her slave into a master, and she had neglected no opportunity to embellish the statue of Quentin for the satisfaction of her own pride.

Having been unable to bring to birth the children she had carried, she held herself responsible for the sterility of their married life and, without any consideration of metaphysics, revered in her husband certain mysterious powers which were deliberately left fallow. When she thought too of that great voice which had fallen silent, of those violent explosions, of those constant escapades, she marvelled that so many forces around her had suddenly been tamed. The only territory which still lay outside her control was the realm of religion, where Suzanne had once ventured without faith or enthusiasm when Quentin had insisted on being married in church, as befitted a man who lived with his head in the clouds. But there was nothing to suggest that he might try to escape once more in the direction of that nebulous domain.

'Night and day,' Quentin was saying, 'there are three hundred planes carrying atom bombs less than two hours away from their targets and just waiting for a red light to tell them to take off. The possibility of instantaneous death is the only problem facing every human being, or at least every civilized human being, every moment of his life. Well, for my part I can say that I'm not afraid. You have to know how to die when your time comes, as the good folk say.'

'That's sacrilege,' said Fouquet. 'If you imagine that that complacent attitude towards death is Christian, then you're absolutely wrong. It's sheer presumption to rush up to the board of examiners like that and agree to their cutting short the examination. It's prejudging the quality of your paper. Are you sure to begin with that you've covered the subject? I'm not. Before giving back my life—and I mean giving back—I want to hang on as long as I can to the possibility of improving it, and I'm not talking about a change of morals but about a blossoming out. The other day I made

the acquaintance of a very old lady who seems to have decided to gobble life down faster than ever now that she's at death's door. She's got the right idea. Who knows if we shan't be held accountable for all the joys we've refused, all the paths we haven't taken, all the glasses we haven't drunk. We musn't turn up our noses at the gifts of creation: God hates people doing that.'

'Fill your glass,' said Quentin. 'You're going to see now what the same wine is like when it dates from 1945, the best of the last forty years. . . . And, just as you might expect, the year I stopped drinking.'

'Your health all the same,' said Fouquet. 'I know that I can't persuade you to have a glass, but I hope that Madame Quentin will keep me company.'

'Have a drop,' said Quentin. 'That never hurt anybody.'

Suzanne hesitantly filled a little glass. She looked at the two men beside her, sitting with their elbows on the table and leaning slightly towards one another. Albert had taken off his jacket as usual; M. Fouquet had kept his on; it seemed to her that this delightful boy, whose good manners were extremely agreeable, and this great hulking man, to whom she felt attached by the strongest of bonds, had nothing left to say to each other; and she began to think that the danger was over.

It was a good wine as far as he could tell, because he knew nothing about such things, but Fouquet derived no pleasure at all from drinking it in this little nook, where there were no echoes. The same process was repeated at irregular intervals: Quentin motioned to Suzanne, she stretched out a warm hand to grasp the bottle, Fouquet glanced inquiringly at Quentin, he ostentatiously turned his glass upside down on the tablecloth, and the questing head of the bottle moved away from it, as if in disgust, and plunged once again into his own glass by some miracle of cybernetics.

'If I did that,' he thought, 'I should set off a chorus of protest; or, worse still, there would be that murmur of incredulous approbation I detest and I should have to put on a virtuous expression. There are only two solutions open to me: either I stop or I get drunk.' He felt bored, started talking like an epicurean cleric, and blamed himself for not being a livelier companion, sensing that Quentin's eager imagination was collapsing like a spoilt soufflé. True, there was something heart-warming about this meal, but there was no fire in it, and it was as if the conversation, like the room, were centrally heated. You had more fun at Esnault's.

'Do you know Esnault?' Suzanne was saying. 'He's a poisonous creature. He's always trying to do harm to my husband. I hate him.'

'Oh, let's not exaggerate,' said Quentin. 'We just don't see things the same way any more, that is if we ever saw them the same way. . . .'

'Time and again he's got you to do stupid things.'

'Hell and damnation,' said Quentin. 'When I do something stupid, I'd like to get the credit for it. Oh, those were great days, Monsieur Fouquet. Took us right out of ourselves.'

'Did you smoke any opium when you were in China?' asked Fouquet.

'Of course I did,' replied Quentin. 'I wanted to know everything. I smoked in Shanghai and I smoked in Hong-Kong too, where skeletons led you to the den along streets hung with little lamps. My pals used to go in with their arms swinging, looking just as if they were going to have their photos taken at the fair, in front of a painted canvas, and then they suddenly vanished into thin air. Silence, solitude, and every man for himself. . . . You come out hitching your trousers up as if you were coming out of a

brothel. It wasn't all that wonderful; a sort of masturbation, that's what I'd call it; you dream and that's about all. . . .'

'You didn't like dreaming?'

'I didn't know how. I dreamt the dream of a common or garden marine. Admiral Guépratte kissed me on the ear; I was given lashings of leave; I came back here to Suzanne; she kissed me too. . . .'

'Nothing out of the ordinary as far as I can see,' said Suzanne with a laugh.

'No, and nothing very world-shaking either.'

'And nowadays?'

'Nowadays I dream that I'm smoking. It's a sign that I'm in my second childhood.'

Fouquet had a sudden revelation of the havoc that could be wrought in this particular life, and the temptation was overwhelming. It was no longer a question of winning a bet or of bringing a man back to the fold, but of corrupting him. The end of the road, the obstacle he had been coming up against for the past month, the stubborn will he had been trying to by-pass, consisted of the resistance the man was putting up to the attraction Fouquet exerted on him. He suddenly became conscious of this unsuspected power which lay within him and of the destination which had been assigned to him. A trial of strength had opened from which he could not withdraw. 'Get ready, old chap,' he thought. 'I haven't come to destroy you but to wake you up. I'm one of those bombers waiting for the red light to go, and my target is two feet away.'

'My husband used to love travelling,' said Suzanne. 'But he doesn't get the chance to do much nowadays. We haven't been to Paris since the 1937 Exhibition. It's impossible for us both to be away at the same time, and neither of us wants to go without the other. One day we really must



make up our minds to close down completely for a fortnight. . . . Just imagine, he knows the timetables of trains all over Europe, all the connections and all the best hotels to stay at. Show Monsieur Fouquet some of your journeys. . . .'

'He isn't interested in that sort of thing,' said Quentin, shooting an irritated glance at his wife.

He felt that the climate of this dinner-party was deteriorating, that there was a void in the middle which nobody could fill, since everybody was talking at cross-purposes, and which was keeping the young man at a distance.

'On the contrary,' said Fouquet, 'I'd be extremely interested to see them.' And there was undoubtedly a hint of mockery in his voice.

Quentin went over to a chest of drawers and brought out a huge file held together by a strap which he laid before Fouquet. Beneath the studied indifference of his manner, the thick fingers revealed in spite of themselves a punctilious passion as he undid a sheaf of papers covered with neat handwriting and timetables marked in red and green ink which he smoothed out with the back of his hand.

'You mustn't expect to find anything exotic in all this,' he said. 'I've put nothing into it but a certain attention to detail.'

'It's his special hobby,' said Suzanne proudly. 'He'd make a wonderful administrator.'

'You've never been tempted to go into politics, have you?' asked Fouquet.

'He was the first man to enter Tigreville at the Liberation,' said Suzanne.

'Oh, don't be ridiculous,' Quentin cut in.

'You were in the army?'

'No. I was more a deserter, an old donkey determined to get back to his oats. I just came home, that's all.'

'You knew the best part of the war.'

'Oh, going off to war isn't so bad either.'

'The trouble is what happens in between.'

'I'm not so sure . . . and you can imagine that with opinions like that I keep right out of local politics. On the other hand I follow very closely what's happening in China. Just think of it, thirty-five years ago, in a city of about a million inhabitants like Chungking, there were no pavements, no gutters, and fewer than a dozen houses standing; just a swarm of human beings who had come up out of the mud and would go back into it. . . . So the idea of rupturing myself to get Tigreville another street urinal, not to mention all the questions of lay education, Algeria and private stills, doesn't really appeal to me very much. I'm just an ordinary citizen, and as for the rest of it, until proof of the contrary I'll go on believing in God because that's how it is. . . . Don't take any notice of that itinerary for Antwerp, it's been out of date since September the fifteenth. Seeing that you like Spain, how about this journey to Andalusia? For convenience' sake, let's suppose we're leaving on a Monday the first. We've got a train at 7.45 which saves us the trouble of changing at Lisieux and gets us to Saint-Lazare at 11.14. We'll take the Number 20 bus unless you have any objections, because that'll give me a chance of seeing something of Paris.'

'At that hour of the day you'll get held up by the traffic.'

'All the better,' said Quentin. 'We've got a two-hour wait before leaving Austerlitz at 13.20. The Southern Express, for an extra charge of 1.500 francs, gets us to the frontier at 21.10. Here we have dinner at the Irun buffet and we can choose between the express at 22.30 and the talgo train at 23.51. They both arrive in Madrid at roughly the same time, that's to say at about eight in the morning on Tuesday the second. Then we take a taxi to the Residencia Mora because it's close to the Atocha station where you have to go if you want a train for the south. . . .'

'You're making fun of me,' said Fouquet. 'We used to stay at the Mora every time we . . .'

'Well, that only goes to show you're an astute traveller. But you're luckier than I am, because if I know how much it costs to stay there, I don't know what the place is really like. Though it can't be far from the Prado, if my memory serves me right, and the cooking is French.'

'You've got a wonderful act there,' said Fouquet coldly.

'I'm sorry,' said Quentin. 'I thought it might amuse you.'

'He's right,' he thought. 'I've forgotten how to put myself in other people's places. Now I've reminded him of that woman. Though I can't say that I'm sorry to have upset him. It's a good thing I couldn't find any sherry in town, otherwise he'd have burst into tears. Dammit, do I cry when I think about China? And yet China is my reflexion in a mirror of a garrison whore, and I've broken the mirror . . .'

'It isn't just an act,' said Suzanne. 'Albert is just as methodical when it comes to planning a real journey. For instance, he's going to Blangy at the end of this week. Well, he's already bought his return ticket for the train, he's mapped out the bus route in the Courriers Picards, and he's booked his room at the hotel. He goes to Blangy every year for All Saints' Day, but that makes no difference: he still manages to introduce a few improvements into the journey. You don't like to go off without a stock of biscuits, do you, Albert?'

'There's nothing wrong with that,' said Quentin in an apologetic voice. 'But you oughtn't to reveal my secrets like that.'

He suddenly realized the pettiness of all these preparations, the utter emptiness and the spineless submission to the formalities of life which they served to conceal. If these were secrets, they were secrets of no importance.

'They're just little fads of mine,' he said.

'So you're going away?' asked Fouquet.

Quentin thought he could detect a note of annoyance in the other's voice, but decided that it was probably just a touch of that solemnity which separation, however brief it may be, always introduces into relations between men which raises the tone of their lives.

'Just for a couple of days,' he said, 'to visit my parents' grave.'

He felt convinced that Fouquet would have given a very different appearance to any pilgrimage of this sort he went on, and the embarrassment this conviction caused him brought him face to face with an almost incredible fact: he was beginning to be troubled by an emotion which had lain asleep within him for so long that he no longer knew how to describe it, and this emotion was the desire to please.

'Monsieur Fouquet,' he said, 'we've got a very old bottle of cognac laid by. Would you care for a glass?'

He laid such heavy emphasis on the proposal that he felt as if he were pushing back some shutters. And he was happy to see an astonished smile dawning opposite him which meant that the message had been received.

## FIVE

**I**F you'd wanted to make him drunk, you wouldn't have gone about it any differently,' said Suzanne.

'Yes I would,' replied Quentin. 'I'd have joined him.'

They were in their bedroom, which didn't look like a hotel bedroom although outside the only thing that distinguished it from the others was the absence of a number over the door. But inside the souvenirs of a whole lifetime were accumulated in a restricted space, where material form and weight rather than sentimental value assigned a permanent position to each object. The word which occurred to Quentin whenever he saw this collection of dubious treasures was 'cargo'. It was accompanied by the gloomy reflexion that the ship's hold had been filled to capacity.

Suzanne stopped her sewing-machine, looked at her husband shaving with the old cut-throat he had never been able to bring himself to part with, and obtained, as she did every morning at the sight of this male horticulture, the pleasurable impression that a controlled force animated that torso bulging out under the braces.

'Perhaps you could start drinking a little wine again with your meals,' she said. 'I watched you last night doing the

honours of our cellar and I thought how splendid you were. I wouldn't want you to feel inferior to anybody else on my account.'

Quentin, holding his head at an angle to the mirror, stood for a moment with his mouth open, wondering whether to tell her once for all that it had nothing to do with her, and that the problem brought into the open by Fouquet's arrival on the scene concerned him alone, for he knew that this revelation would be a terrible disappointment to Suzanne. Then, deciding that her proposal was a well-meant overture, he confined himself to stating:

'If I were to miss anything, it wouldn't be wine but drunkenness. Try and understand what I mean: the only drunkards you know are the sick ones, those you see vomiting all over the place, and the brutes, those who go looking for a fight; but there are also the princes in disguise whom you think you know but can't quite identify. They are like the murderer who commits the perfect crime, the crime you never hear about unless it fails to come off. Nobody so much as suspects these people; they are capable of the finest compliments and the foulest insults; they are surrounded by darkness and flashes of lightning; they are acrobats who are sure they are still walking the tight-rope when they've already left it, evoking cries of admiration or fear which can either bring them back to safety or send them crashing to the ground. For them, drink adds an extra dimension to life, especially when it's a case of a poor devil of an innkeeper like me, a sort of fine spell, from which you shouldn't feel excluded incidentally, and which is probably just an illusion, but a controlled illusion. . . . That's what I might hanker after again. You probably think I'm singing the praises of drunkenness because Fouquet is going through a difficult period just now and because I like the boy, and to a very large extent you're right; otherwise I wouldn't dream

of waving this skeleton in the cupboard at somebody I treated so badly in the past and who stood by me so loyally.'

Suzanne sighed:

'All the same, it's ages since we had to bother our heads about that sort of thing. . . . As it happens, I was just going to ask you what I ought to do if Monsieur Fouquet decided to treat himself to a few "illusions" while you're away.'

'That would surprise me,' said Quentin, 'even though he's the sort of man who does what he likes; but I doubt whether he really enjoys drinking. No, don't laugh. . . . Imagine somebody out for a walk who suddenly sees a fascinating passage and dives into it because there's nothing to tempt him on the other side of the street.'

'I must admit he doesn't look like the human wrecks you see littering the district. I confess I was the first to fall under his spell and I don't deny either that I've felt a desire to protect him ever since we found out how things stood. Even so, I thought he was very peculiar last night, after dinner, when he started talking to you about the corrida you'd bought tickets for today, or something of the kind. . . . And you looked so embarrassed!'

'Don't worry too much about that. I think there's an unhappy love-affair at the bottom of it all.'

Trotting out his explanation which he had been keeping in reserve since the previous Sunday to account for Fouquet's behaviour, knowing that it would constitute an extenuating circumstance in Suzanne's eyes, Quentin couldn't help regarding it as regrettable: it wasn't consolation one should look for in alcohol but stimulation. At least the elegiac generations who had spoilt the trade could stand surety if necessary.

'Well,' said Suzanne, 'now we know practically everything about him. From what he said to us last night I gathered he was in advertising, and now you tell me he's

making a sort of retreat here at the end of an unhappy love-affair; that's right, isn't it? . . . To a certain extent, I must say I find that reassuring.'

Quentin carefully wiped his razor on a strap hanging underneath a photograph of Suzanne's grandfather and shut it with a sharp click.

'Suzanne,' he said quietly, 'you've got nothing but good qualities; physically, you've aged just as I would have wished you to; at present you are perfect in your dual role as wife and hostess, but you bore me, you bore me stiff. . . . I fail to see how you can possibly find what you know about Monsieur Fouquet reassuring; on the contrary, I should be worried if I were you to have a husband who's just discovered that everything that used to be reassuring is boring, like these souvenirs that surround us; we can't subtract anything from them, we can't add anything to them, and soon it will be our turn to assume a pose among them, because we are arriving at the last stage of our lives. And now, all of a sudden, I for my part want a little more of the unexpected, and I'm going to take it where I find it. I don't want somebody by my side frantically trying to cut it down as soon as it offers itself.'

'I must say you've played an underhand game the last ten years.'

'That isn't true. I didn't need to make any effort to conform to the discipline I imposed on myself. If I carried self-control, precision and exactness to extremes, it may have been precisely because those virtues didn't come naturally to me, but I didn't find the game at all irksome until these last few days; indeed, I got a lot of satisfaction out of it.'

Quentin had finished tying his tie and was now filling his pockets with a series of mechanical gestures which distributed card-cases, wallets, key-rings and notebooks with infallible accuracy among various places on his person,



providing him with extra ballast. Suzanne tried to convince herself that a man as thoroughly loaded as that couldn't go far astray: everything that could attach or restrain had its significance on the road he was taking.

'Perhaps it's a good thing you're going away for a day or two,' she said. 'This little trip will help to sort out your ideas.'

'You're right,' he said. 'I'm being ridiculous. It's better to see things as they really are. These ideas of another world, another life, close at hand but hidden from sight, must have come to me from the religion I was brought up in. There's something mystic about the contemplative ecstasy of a drunkard. . . .'

'The connexion had already occurred to me,' said Suzanne.

'Oh, I know, you're going to tell me about your father, who didn't drink and who arranged his life so that he went straight from the farm to the grave without going into either the church or the pub opposite; and perhaps you are going to tell me too that we've got him to thank for our hotel. . . . I'm sorry, that was unfair: you've never said that to me, even when it came much closer to the truth than it does today . . . .'

Quentin put a kindly hand on the back of Suzanne's neck and bent her head gently over her work.

'Let's say no more about it. The important thing is that you shouldn't cold-shoulder Monsieur Fouquet while I'm away. The poor chap's got nothing to do with it and he's probably got enough trouble on his hands with his own affairs. Though I'm not all that sure that any man's affairs are really his own; the inclination some people show to put theirs in common and to share in other people's undoubtedly corresponds to a profound instinct of the species. For after all, the ability to share the sorrows and joys of others distinguishes us from the animals. And there again you have

to admit that the formalities of this emotional bequest are never carried out better than over a glass. . . .’

Suzanne listened in alarm to this endless speech which seemed to her to bode no good. Her husband wasn’t in the habit of talking at such length, least of all in this confidential, objective manner which brought a private internal debate out into the open.

‘All that,’ she said, ‘doesn’t tell me whether I’m to give Monsieur Fouquet the key, that is supposing he asks for it.’

Quentin thought for a moment, then gave the ghost of a smile.

‘We talk about him as if he were a child,’ he said. ‘No. Tell him that it’s my key and I’ve taken it with me.’

‘And what if he climbs in over the railings?’

‘He won’t. As soon as he knows about the key, he’ll understand.’

‘Understand what?’

‘That it’s I who have refused to let him have it,’ said Quentin smugly.

Suzanne suddenly thought her husband looked insufferably stupid and pleased with himself.

When he woke up, Fouquet noted that he was becoming increasingly incapable of taking his liquor, if it was consumed at over-short intervals, but for once he felt no morning-after remorse because the bulky silhouette of M. Quentin was closely linked with this latest lapse. The incident might have left him a little dull-witted but it didn’t affect his conscience; it didn’t set off any movement of revolt within him but gave him rather the impression of having come close to a living truth in a light which had now faded, and his sadness sprang from a feeling of paradise lost. One picture in particular kept recurring to his mind: that of Quentin’s hands, already covered with brown patches, the

plant-like signs of old age, and in comparison the rumination one could feel going on underneath that coarse exterior. The mystery he had stumbled on was that of a man who had come too quickly to the end of his life, a stunting of growth which had been deliberately accepted, the disturbing suicide of a wild-boar, of a hermit.

'What men say to one another is soon said,' thought Fouquet. 'Last night I made a new friend and yet we haven't exchanged so much as half a dozen words of serious talk. The thing that exists between us goes deeper than that; an attitude reveals it, a look lights it up; the rest is nothing. This man could be my father. And it's true that Quentin inspires respect, but with him I understand it differently. What is deserving of respect in old people isn't that enormous past we call experience, but that precarious future which reminds us through them of the imminence of death and familiarizes them with the great mysteries. And there it seems to me that my new friend has thrown in the sponge rather early on. . . .'

The rain beating against the window-panes brought Fouquet's thoughts back to All Saints' Day. He asked himself what he was going to do with the days when the absence of both his daughter and his host condemned him to absolute solitude. Taking refuge at Esnault's was a solution which involved risks he wasn't prepared to face. What is more, since the dinner the night before, he felt that he was associated with Quentin in the martyrdom which the incomprehension of his old friends was inflicting on him, and without giving up the idea of breaking down his defences himself, he considered that this wasn't a case for bar-room humour. But for the fear of appearing to compare this pilgrimage to an excursion, he would have suggested accompanying Quentin to Picardy, just to be able to share with him the brief taste of freedom for which he felt certain

the journey was really a pretext; not that he imagined it as a riotous spree but as a different way of walking along the street, of passing other people, of looking at the time. And the behaviour of a man paying a visit to his home town is always a pathetic sight.

The month he had passed at Tigreville hadn't erased all memory of Claire, but her desertion was less painful to him in this new climate where she became confused in a distant haze with a whole network of habits. Apart from a few cruel stabs of memory, he had come to regard the young woman as nothing more than the most delightful attraction offered by the capital, to which she must have returned some time ago. He had often hoped for a letter from her from Spain, though afraid that it would be lukewarm and serene. But her silence continued to clothe their separation in the mantle of tragedy in which nothing is said in its entirety until the curtain line. His own absence constituted a proud retort.

The letter which Marie-Jo slipped underneath his door half-way through the morning was from Gisèle. She had signed it with her maiden name, a coquettish practice common to wives whom divorce has restored to a state of innocence. The paper, crumpled from being passed around among postmen and concierges, was wet from the last downpour and the message looked as if it had been entrusted to a bottle thrown into the sea. It had in point of fact come a long way. None the less the import was as clear as if it had been delivered at point-blank range: Gisèle refused to allow Marie to leave school unless somebody went to fetch her. 'She is much too absent-minded,' she said, 'to be allowed to travel by herself. I have been in touch with the headmistress and she is of the same opinion. There is no organized party. Only one pupil in the top class is taking the train in question and the school declines all responsibility. What is more,

this other pupil is making the return journey by car, so who is to take Marie back to school? As you can see, it is all very complicated. It is a pity that you thought it necessary to tell her about your plans before everything had been settled. Now her hopes have been raised just to be dashed to the ground. But that is just like you: your first impulse is always a good one and all too often the only one. . . .'

As usual when he was annoyed or when he had an important decision to make, Fouquet went to the mirror. The face it showed him was that of a very young man and, following an established convention, he marvelled that all the things which had happened to him in this filthy life hadn't left more of a mark on him. Was it possible that he had ever been really aware of the burden of his condition as a human being, that the solemn question of responsibility had ever been debated behind that unlined forehead? 'What can you expect from a mug like that?' he asked himself. 'The hydrogen bomb, the under-developed countries, the state of the nation's finances, family quarrels, unhappy love-affairs, taxes and drinks, all slide off it like water off a duck's back. The man really isn't worthy of the misfortunes that happen to him. Send him back to the cloakroom, back to limbo. Dammit all, he looks positively happy!' Making an effort to attain total impassivity, Fouquet, devoid of all expression, saw his features collapse into such utter vacuity that once again he was horrified by the indigence of this raw material with which he would now have to remodel his mask. Lighting up first one eye and then the other, trying out a few manly wrinkles at the tip of the eyebrows, narrowing the nostrils, and giving the smile a wide margin of tenderness and irony, he ended up by composing a face steeped in quiet merriment and firm resolution. And at the same time he was seized by the unshakeable conviction that there was only one thing a man with a face like that could

do, and that was to inform the school that he was coming himself two days later to fetch his daughter to take her to Paris by the five o'clock train, and that she was to get ready to go with him. A few crafty telephone calls would take care of everything.

For the moment he didn't stop to calculate the consequences of this decision. Washing and shaving in a frantic hurry, he rushed out to the post office. On the way he gave Quentin a conspiratorial wave which failed to evoke the expected response. On the contrary, he had the impression that the older man was looking at him coldly, and put this reserve down to a sagacious nature disconcerted by the exuberance which he felt radiating from him. Something had started working again, something he could set in motion and then control, an enterprise which gave a meaning to his stay, established a connexion between Tigreville and Paris, and had all the appearance of a good deed.

Towns you are going to leave always smile at you. The streets, that particular morning, didn't strike him as being either gayer or sadder than usual, but he felt at home in them. He could look with detached curiosity at the misshapen villas in which a few retired people had taken refuge, while the silent façades of the tall houses buried under wild vegetation no longer depressed him. In the centre of the town, he noticed that two or three more shops specializing in seaside knick-knacks had closed down since his arrival and thought sadly that he would probably never again see the one-legged lady who sold skipping-ropes, nor the little old woman with her pram full of shell-fish, nor the sandman, the real one, whose donkey used to look for him in all the cafés when he dawdled on the way to the beach. Coming out of the post office, he ventured in the direction of the Chemin Grattepain in the hope of being able to ogle the two girls with complete impunity with an eye that was already

very Parisian. But he didn't notice them among the white-armed milkmaids that the dairy disgorged in little spurts marked by the hoots of the midday sirens. From the slight pang that affected him, he realized that he had no intention of coming back to Tigreville, that he belonged once more to the old order of things from which he wouldn't be able to escape a second time. That encounter with the girls, which he might never have thought about again, suddenly left him with a taste of something unfinished, like a novel interrupted in the middle of a sentence. How many sketches had to be discarded before one could make so much as a single gesture in this life! He was going to have to cut himself off from this bright new friendship with Quentin, he would never know the warm comfort of it, the blind practice deadened by custom. Coming back to the Stella for lunch, he felt so sad that he didn't dare announce the news of his departure, even to Marie-Jo who would have served as a good testing-ground but who would have laughed incredulously at him, she was so full of the never-ripe fruit of the present.

On rainy Thursdays, the pupils of the Dillon Institute, under the supervision of a monitor, invaded an amusement hall next to the casino, which itself had been closed down early in September. It was a long narrow room equipped with distorting mirrors, electric pin-tables and juke-boxes where the young lovers of the town were not above coming to make contact, keeping up a tremendous din which was drowned by popular tunes. Here the children replenished their stock of songs and slang words. About five o'clock, Fouquet found that he could no longer resist the temptation to go round to this hall to see if he could discover in Marie's behaviour any signs of the happiness which had been promised her for the weekend. To a mute inquiry from

Quentin, surprised by all these comings and goings, he thought it necessary to reply.

'I'll be back soon.'

This sort of supervision which would have irked him the day before now struck him as the expression of a watchful affection which needed to be treated with consideration.

'I'm going over to the Kursaal,' he added, to let him know that he wasn't going to Esnault's.

Quentin shrugged his shoulders as if to say that that was all the same to him, but just as the young man was opening the gate he called out to him:

'If you aren't going anywhere in particular, I'd like to come along with you. I haven't seen the sea for a long time.'

Fouquet had adopted too casual an attitude to be able to evade this proposal. While Quentin was telling Suzanne that he was going out, he consoled himself with the reflexion that he could always walk past the games section if his companion's presence hindered his manoeuvres. All the same, he was rather disappointed at the idea of having to give up his last chance of seeing Marie abandon herself to his fatherly attention with a lack of restraint he would never know again. Even Gisèle, except perhaps when Marie had been a baby, had never had the same power over her daughter, nor known the exquisite torment of a vigilant tenderness given without hope of return. At the same time, he told himself yet again that it would probably have been simpler and fairer to inform everybody that he was spending a month close to his child, even if that had meant revealing his hide-out and drawing other people's attention to his behaviour. 'I've just been through a tremendous crisis,' he thought. 'From one day to the next, you don't notice anything, but taken all together it's pretty terrifying. It's about time I closed this parenthesis in my life.'

Quentin joined him a few minutes later. He had put a



thick sweater on underneath his jacket, which gave a rather vulgar touch of whimsy to his silhouette.

'My wife was afraid I might catch cold,' he explained. 'She was afraid of a lot of other things too.'

In the gathering dusk, they turned down the Rue Sinistrée. The two men walked silently side by side. Now and then Quentin acknowledged the greeting of a fellow-citizen surprised at finding him in town at that hour and in that company. Fouquet became increasingly conscious of the oddity of this walk which the relationship entered into at the dinner the night before didn't entirely justify. He could feel the explanation coming on and would have liked to go into the nearest café to improvise a hurried setting for what was going to be said and if necessary fake the meaning of the words. He dreaded a conversation without any accessories.

When he got to the Boulevard Aristide-Chany, Quentin stopped to gaze at the rough, empty sea.

'Have you noticed,' he said, 'that there's never a boat to be seen? No port, no traffic. The fish comes from Ouistreham, whose lighthouse we can see from here at night. The ring of lights coming on over there is Le Havre. Here we are forgotten and we don't count for anything. I've never tried to find out why you came here, but I got the impression that there was something wrong. Why do you drink like you do?'

'I've heard that question before,' said Fouquet bitterly.

'It's the question everybody who is fond of you is bound to ask you. You've no business to drink like that, you know.'

'I suppose you have.'

Quentin felt angry with himself for having attacked in that way. In the matter of the rights of the individual, he was all for absolute toleration. It hurt him to hear himself saying the opposite of what he thought. His only object in

embarking on this conversation had been to talk a little about himself, and he had begun with a display of clumsy solicitude.

'You must take me for an old woman... But I'm not preaching at you. I take care of myself as best as I can. If I don't drink any more it's because I made a bet that I wouldn't, and now you're making me lose that bet just when I least expected to. . . . Do you believe in God?'

'I think so,' said Fouquet.

'I don't know if I do, but if I couldn't believe in myself any more, then who else could I trust?'

They were walking slowly along the promenade towards the Kursaal, the door of which appeared as a pink opening in the hermetic façade of the casino.

'I'm no stronger than the next man,' Quentin went on. 'If I said not a single glass, it's because I know what I'm like; once I started again, I wouldn't stop. And yet I'd have liked to brighten the world up a bit with you. You are going to be reasonable, aren't you?'

Fouquet caught sight of his daughter excitedly turning the handles of a football game and instinctively stepped back slightly.

'Just a minute,' he said.

Marie was still obstinately refusing to wear the dwarf's pullover. Already, watching from his post among the rocks, a benefactor eager to suck his benefaction like a sweet, Fouquet had been puzzled to notice how reluctant she seemed to discard the ragged thing she was wearing. The reasons for this reluctance escaped him.

'Do you come here for the children or the girls?' asked Quentin with a touch of irritation in his voice.

Sure enough, mixed up with the schoolchildren were some lively young girls, swinging their legs backwards and forwards for the benefit of a few dull-witted youths with

their hands in their pockets propped up against the juke-boxes. In this enthralling spot the monitor was having some difficulty in keeping track of her charges. Fouquet recognized Monique and François standing cheek-to-cheek in front of a mechanical fakir whose oracular pronouncements were supposed to set the seal on grown-up promises. Without looking at them once, Marie went on sparring furiously with a boy much younger than herself who seemed to be completely under her spell. It was obvious that the break was final.

'I'm looking at that little girl,' replied Fouquet, 'the one jumping up and down by a sort of billiard table. What do you think of her?'

His voice was full of the anxious pride of a young man telling the head of the family that he has an illegitimate child: you dreamt of having a granddaughter . . . well, here she is.

'Anybody would think you'd made her yourself,' said Quentin. 'Yes, she is a nice little thing, a bit on the skinny side though; how about that fat one with the red knob? . . . But I must admit I don't know a thing about kids. At my age, they don't mean very much to me; I'm sixty years old, remember; there's a link missing from the chain.'

Feeling vaguely disappointed, Fouquet thought to himself that his own chain had been broken into a thousand pieces.

'You seem to be fond of children,' Quentin went on. 'When you've got that in front of you, you mustn't drink like you do. I mean in that brutal, desperate way. It's just too damned stupid, destroying yourself. Instead of throwing your hand in, you ought to try and keep yourself in trim, and there I'll grant you there's nothing better than a drop of spirits to brighten things up.'

'The trouble is that I'm like you,' said Fouquet. 'I don't know how to stop in time either.'

'All I'm asking you is to be reasonable,' said Quentin.

'At least until I get back. Don't let yourself get carried away. . . . Even if it's only for poor old Mother Quentin's sake. I'm leaving on Saturday, remember.'

So that was what he was leading up to, thought Fouquet. In that case he could reassure him straight away.

'I'm leaving too,' he said.

'You can't mean that!' said Quentin with a frown.

'Yes, I can. I'm going to Paris; on Saturday too.'

Quentin turned his head away. The shock struck him as out of all proportion. A fairground ditty laid an unsolicited emphasis on his silence. It was a time for dignity. He laid a hand on Fouquet's shoulder.

'It isn't because I've just been talking to you like that?' he asked anxiously. 'Or something Suzanne said?'

'No, honestly it isn't. I have to go away.'

'Have you got your ticket?'

'No.'

'Of course not: I was forgetting that everybody isn't like me. But you're coming back, aren't you?'

'Coming back? You must be joking!'

Quentin felt certain now that the two of them had come close to an experience of capital importance. In a vague fog, he saw a kind of picture, livelier than an allegory and full of the noise of crowds, in which a father and his son were drinking together, bound to one another by the same secret, and through them, down the centuries, in bars which became cafés, cafés which became wine-shops, wine-shops which became taverns, other men clinked glasses from generation to generation. He noticed that there was little room in his picture for the face of woman.

'Has she come back?' he asked timidly.

Fouquet, who couldn't remember ever having told Quentin anything about his life with Claire, was both surprised and grateful for the discreet nature of the question.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Probably. But that isn't what's taking me back to Paris.'

He could see Marie through the window, wandering unhappily among the various attractions, and told himself that in fact he was alarmingly free, even to come back to Tigreville if the fancy took him. In any case he was certain to feel a nostalgic regret for the place fairly often. In a way he too had his life behind him and he had to turn round to look it in the face.

'You said just now,' he went on, 'that one hadn't any right to throw one's hand in. But my answer to that is that it's hard enough arranging one life without trying to work out another.'

'But dammit all, you're young!'

'You don't know the young,' said Fouquet. 'Just look at them: a whole head taller than we are. Saints or guttersnipes, with pure and arid souls, who see everything in terms of black and white. Greedy and uncompromising, that's what they are. They don't drink and they're absolutely terrifying. They never make allowances for anything. My generation will be the last generation of gay dogs with nothing to do.'

Quentin was very much of the same opinion, and this pleased him. What he liked about Fouquet was that he didn't appear to belong to any particular time of life; he escaped the distinction between parent and child; he was neither the one nor the other. A born friend, in fact. . . .

'If you don't mind my asking,' he said, 'are your parents still alive?'

'My father's dead,' replied Fouquet. 'He died of the war, or perhaps I should say of the two wars. . . . He put up a good fight, but he just couldn't stand them. There was at least one too many.'

Quentin grasped him by the arm and took him back along the promenade. They scarcely said a word until they got

back to the garden of the hotel, where the older man released his grip.

'You looked gay and energetic this morning,' he said. 'Was that because you had decided to go?'

'It was the thought of a change. But it was a stupid idea, because I'm going back to Paris where everything will start all over again.'

'Look at our sign,' said Quentin. 'Come back to us. Suzanne will be waiting for you too. We'll celebrate your return. After all, I'm coming back. And I'm sure your work will allow you to settle down here. You'll have peace and quiet. What else do you want?'

'I should like to be old,' said Fouquet.

## SIX

THE following Saturday, the Hôtel Stella lost its usual homely country look. Starting first thing in the morning, crowds of relatives and brothers in arms flocked in from the four corners of Europe to disport themselves among the military cemeteries scattered about the district. After twelve years, many of the visitors met each other again as old acquaintances. The last to appear on the scene, the Germans, were by no means the least assiduous. In the dining-room ablaze with badges, cockades and medals, the meals took on the appearance of armistices. Once the last mouthful had been swallowed, every man retired to his own camp and entrenched himself behind his dead. In the evening there was some hard drinking, and that was perhaps one of the reasons why Quentin always went away at this time, with Suzanne's full approval. Two daily helps who served in the hotel every August were brought in again for the occasion; they looked as sinister as circumstances demanded.

The unusual atmosphere had turned the heads of the staff, and Marie-Jo, her cheeks burning, was accepting the glasses Fouquet kept pouring out for her. As soon as she

had been told the news of the young man's departure, she had accepted it philosophically. He had taken refuge from the invasion in the pantry. Ever since noon, with all his bags packed, he had felt as if he were walking up and down a station waiting-room and had been unable to think of any other way of expressing his inner turmoil than by buying drinks all round, taking advantage of the fact that for once bottles were circulating freely in the house. While he had been settling his bill, and incidentally making rather heavy weather of it, Suzanne had repeated her husband's offer: he could come back whenever he liked on the most preferential terms; he would be charged at the commercial travellers' rates and would be treated as one of the family. He had kissed her. Then he had gone to say his goodbyes at Esnault's, without any regrets and more to calm his nerves than anything else, returning in high spirits.

Quentin found him sitting on the table, trying to press some whisky on the old cook, and made no secret of his surprise.

'What can you expect? We aren't in our own house any more,' said Fouquet, jerking his head towards the rest of the hotel.

'You wouldn't think so from the way you're behaving,' said Quentin without any malice. 'I came to say goodbye.'

'You're going before me?'

'I'm not so sure about that. You look pretty far gone yourself.'

'I don't know why, but I thought we were taking the same train. I'd got a surprise in store for you. . . . A pity, because you'll miss us.'

'Get along with you,' said Quentin.

'How about one for the road?' asked Fouquet.

He held out the bottle with a meaning wink and the maids started giggling. Quentin turned on his heel and let the double doors bang behind him. The young man's sarcasm



followed him into the hall: 'You aren't the sort to jump into a moving train, are you!' He went into the little windowless dining-room where his suitcase was standing in splendid isolation like a piece of altar furniture in the middle of the tablecloth, and sat down to undo his shoelaces for a moment. His all too obviously best suit irked him. He emptied his pockets of the road maps he always took with him to be able to identify towns and villages under his breath. He felt tired and depressed. Up to the very last moment, he had gone on hoping that Fouquet wouldn't leave the Stella for good, but all his things had been brought down, and his bedclothes were decking the window of Room No. 8. The young man was going to disappear as he had come, or almost: Suzanne had had the missing button sewn on to his suede jacket.

'Suzanne!' he shouted.

She was there at once, on her way between reception-desk, cash-desk and dining-room; she blossomed out in this convivial atmosphere.

'Keep an eye on him,' he said.

'Is anything wrong?'

'You can never tell. . . . If necessary, take him all the way to the station.'

'You must admit it's extraordinary,' sighed Suzanne.

'It's because he's leaving us,' declared Quentin. 'There's no need to look for any other explanation.'

'It's a week now since it started and he's kept it up nearly all the time. And in spite of that, I know we're going to be silly enough to miss the young rascal.'

'He just needs to settle down. The trouble is, he's had a long way to come. And then, we mustn't exaggerate: in somebody we didn't care about we probably wouldn't notice it so much. But we're always watching him, often without even realizing it. . . .'

Not wanting to annoy her husband just before he left, Suzanne ended up by agreeing with him. She was still alarmed to see him so agitated, but thought that he was more tolerant and above all more frank and open than before. Perhaps in the last analysis Fouquet had helped to bring them closer together. She was just advising Quentin to start getting ready when her instinct told her that something was happening in the dining-room. Pushing the door open, she saw that the customers had interrupted their lunch to crowd round the French windows. Marie-Jo, who must have been one of the first to have a look, came back in a state of great excitement. She ran straight into Suzanne.

'Madame, Monsieur,' she gasped, 'come and see! Monsieur Fouquet's out on the square!'

'Well, and what's wrong with that?'

'He's acting all peculiar.'

'Christ!' said Quentin.

Most of the Stella's guests were out in the garden, holding their napkins in their hands and gazing in the direction of the Place du 25 Juillet, where people were leaning out of their windows to see what was happening. A crowd was beginning to collect on the pavement; every face bore an expression of curiosity, amused in some cases, anxious in others. In the middle of the square, close to the refuge which he kept kicking at nervously, stood Fouquet, his chest out, his head back, his eyes fixed on the Paris road. He had taken off his jacket and was holding it spread out at the end of his right arm, jerking it up and down with his wrist so that it brushed the ground. His left hand, pressed against his stomach, was ruffling an imaginary jabot.

'That's three cars he's dodged already,' said a Belgian.

'Dodged? Don't you see that he's trying to get in their way?'

'You ruddy swine!' muttered Quentin, pushing through

the crowd to get to the gate. Fouquet moving round the square with provocative little steps, caught sight of him, gave him a smile and a bow, and then, taking a handkerchief out of his pocket, tossed it in the direction of the hotel. He had scarcely completed this gesture before a car entered the empty square. Hesitating at first, it gathered speed as it turned, and the young man could be seen going forward in a challenging manner to block its path and incite it to come at him. He seemed to be calling to it in endearing terms.

'Monsieur Gabriel!' shouted Marie-Jo.

'Shut up!' said Quentin. 'It's too late. . . .'

The driver had no time to slow down. . . . Standing motionless, his feet together, his stomach almost touching the bonnet, Fouquet enveloped the car in a caressing movement as it bore down on him; for a moment, he gave the impression that he was going to leave his jacket on the side of the car, but then it had gone and he was tucking the coat under his arm, thus freeing his right hand so that he could wave to the gasping onlookers.

'Olé!' he shouted, picking up the handkerchief, on which a tyre-mark was clearly visible.

Quentin was lost in astonishment. 'The young devil!' he muttered. Already another car was hurtling into the square with its horn blaring.

'Albert!' said Suzanne, holding him back by the sleeve.

Sunshine and trumpets inside Fouquet's head. It was a magnificent beast. Solid on its legs, with a wide forehead between horns like headlamps, it charged straight at him from a distance. Another few yards and it would be on top of him. He must get the better of it . . . not give an inch . . . tackle it face to face. 'Lunging with the sword over the cloth,' he chanted, 'he dived into the cradle of the horns and accepted death the better to inflict it. . . . Olé!'

The engine of the Chevrolet, pitching against its shock-absorbers, was shuddering against Fouquet's thigh, while he stood smiling broadly, one hand resting masterfully on the radiator. The huge car had literally stopped dead, and up to the very last second it had looked as if nothing could save the young man from being crushed under its wheels. Two doors banged at the same time; a man and a woman rushed forward with fists raised. . . .

'What's the matter?' asked Quentin, barring their way.

The crowd gathered in a circle round the car and Fouquet, his forehead dripping with sweat, gazed affectionately at this hostile audience.

'Disgraceful,' somebody said, 'acting like that in front of people who've come here to see their dead.'

'Leave the lad alone!' roared Quentin. 'Can't you see he isn't himself?'

'Precisely,' said the driver. 'This is a matter for the police; somebody go and get the gendarmes! . . . Cars are my business, Monsieur, and I'm interested in everything that involves discipline on the roads. I own two garages at Domfront, if you want my card . . .'

The garages at Domfront struck a chord in Fouquet's memory. Looking round, he recognized What's-her-name's father. He gave a beatific smile: it was too good to be true! He had just broken in the loud-mouthed garage-proprietor, the proud paterfamilias, and Mme Have into the bargain.

'That's worth two ears and a circuit of the ring,' he said in a thick voice.

'Now what does he want?' asked Monique's father. 'And where are those gendarmes?'

'At Timbuctoo,' Quentin answered blandly.

'As for you, I used to patronize your restaurant, but I can tell you now that you've just lost my custom.'

'You know what you can do with your bloody custom.'

The gendarmes finally appeared, as embarrassed as they always are when the initiative isn't theirs and they have to choose between two completely contradictory statements. The pair in question, Garcia and Lalanne by name, had only recently been transferred from a village in the Charentes and were still anything but familiar with the district. Which meant that they could make neither head nor tail of all the evidence they were given in the local dialect.

'Hey there, carabineers!' cried Fouquet. 'Tell me what I've done wrong. This is an ungrateful crowd I've got here, and yet I've given them their money's worth. You aren't going to suggest I tried to smash this car, are you? Why, you can see for yourselves that there isn't a scratch on it.'

Not wanting to return empty-handed, the gendarmes picked on Fouquet as the worst dressed of those present and marched him off, followed some of the way by the crowd.

'At last!' exclaimed the young man. 'The triumphal exit from the Arena; the aficionados are escorting me through the streets. You realize, don't you, Monsieur Quentin, that this is an exceptional honour paid to skill and bravery.'

'Don't you worry, my boy, they haven't seen the last of me,' muttered Quentin, following behind with the rest, his tie undone and his shirt open, he felt so hot under the collar.

When Fouquet woke up on a bench in the police station, which stank of paste and ink, night was falling, and he wondered why he should have fallen asleep in this post office. At one of the counters he saw Quentin's figure bending over a green tulip-lamp which was answering him from below.

'But I keep telling you,' he was saying, 'that I'll go bail for him. I'm properly licensed; I've got a good reputation as an honest tradesman; surely that should be sufficient for you.'

Intrigued by this conversation, Fouquet came nearer.

'Oh, no!' said Quentin. 'You stay out of this.'

His tone of voice admitted of no argument.

'Just as you wish,' said Fouquet innocently. 'I'll wait for you outside.'

'That's right, go and have a breath of fresh air, it'll do you good. . . . Well, sergeant, you do see that there's nothing to it, don't you? Tomorrow he'll have gone and that's the last we'll hear of him. . . . If he got drunk, it was at my place. I'm the guilty party. Well, I defy you to cite a single infraction of the law in my hotel in the last ten years. That ought to count too.'

'I know, Monsieur Quentin. But we've got to go carefully in a ticklish matter like this involving two outsiders.'

'I beg your pardon! You can't call me an outsider, and I'm the one who's concerned. . . .'

'The plaintiff says he has connexions, important connexions too, in the department.'

'Bah! If I were you, I'd pass it all on to Paris and let them lose it in their files. Wash your hands of the whole affair. Because I can assure you that my client has got connexions too, and not in Domfront either, I can tell you that. . . .'

'We'll say no more about it this time,' said the sergeant.

Fouquet had disappeared. Quentin caught up with him a good way down the street: he was running away, his shoulders shaking with sobs.

'What's the matter with you?'

'I don't know. I feel ashamed of myself. It's my nerves.'

'Are you potty? You don't mean to tell me that you're going to start crying the day you've brought off your corrida. Why, there are a hell of a lot of people who'd give their eye teeth to pull off a fight like that.'

Fouquet gave a grateful smile and appeared to calm down a little.

'I think a glass of something wouldn't do me any harm,' he said.

'You may be right,' said Quentin, 'but not at Esnault's, I imagine?'

'No,' said Fouquet, 'and not at the hotel either, if it's all the same to you.'

Quentin thought for a moment, then turned off to the left in the direction of the Saint-Clare calvary.

'I'm going to take you to a place you don't know, where nobody'll disturb us.'

It was almost out in the country: a wooden shack clinging to the cliff, from which the whole coastline could be seen stretching away under a thin moon in a chaotic sequence of bays and promontories. You got to it by way of a coast-guards' path. Quentin crossed a little enclosure, pushed the door open, and stopped on the threshold.

'Albert!' said a woman's voice. 'It can't be!'

He stood to one side to let Fouquet pass.

'Good evening, Annie. I'd like you to meet a toreader.'

Fouquet found himself in a narrow room lined with bamboo screens on which were hung fans, Samurai sabres and porcelain vases, surplus bric-à-brac from a Japanese billiard saloon. Paper lanterns half-way up the wall shed a reddish glow which lit up only the top of the head, the rest of the face looking as if it were covered with a diaphanous silk scarf. Annie was a woman of no specific age with a perfect figure, an Indo-Chinese to judge by her rather narrow eyes.

'I don't guarantee that this is all genuine,' said Quentin, 'but in a high wind it can be quite convincing.'

They sat down on the benches attached to opposite sides of one of the low tables which stretched in a row all the way to the bar.

'This place is called the Bungalow, and it's a cross between

a pub and a house of call. At certain times of the year, the local bigwigs bring their tarts along here or come to meet some new ones. Especially in winter, when it's hellish boring on the plateau; but the high spot of the year is Easter. I used to come here in the old days, by myself I might add, and I managed to persuade myself that on the other side of these bamboo screens there were towns with trams rattling past, whistles blowing and men fighting. . . .'

Fouquet saw that he was no longer in the presence of the man he knew: this one looked around him without the slightest embarrassment, took off his tie and stuffed it into his pocket, and threw out his chest as he breathed in the atmosphere of the place and a heady smell of brandy and expensive perfume.

'What will you have?' asked Annie.

'The usual,' said Quentin.

The woman was touched by this confident, egotistical answer, which implied that the world ought not to have changed during all the time Quentin had turned his back on it.

'I would point out that I haven't seen anything of you for ten years or so, and that my legendary discretion doesn't allow me to have too good a memory.'

She still expressed herself with refinement, avoiding the influence of Tigreville, which with the exception of a few initiates knew nothing about her. She obtained her supplies from Caen and took her pleasures at Le Havre or Cherbourg; she was a seaport whore such as Quentin couldn't even dream about any more.

'Do you still brew that sort of saké?'

'Yes,' she said. 'People come quite a long way to drink it.'

'A couple then,' said Quentin, bringing his fist down gently on the table. 'We always call it saké,' he explained



quickly to avoid Fouquet's eyes, 'but really it's a very peculiar white brandy. Everything's fake here, but what the hell does it matter after a corrida like that?'

'And what about your train?' asked Fouquet, with all the less conviction in that he was thinking of his own.

'Oh, it'll wait till the next time,' said Quentin. 'Let's say it's been derailed. . . . You've missed yours too.'

Already, back at the police station, Fouquet had thought of Marie sitting on her suitcase in the hall of the Dillon Institute. He could picture the spot exactly, under the high windows brushed by the black branches of the park. The hands of the clock went round; the rooms emptied little by little; François had gone without her. Perhaps she had imagined the miraculous possibility of a car, thus prolonging her agony. Now she was painfully trying to tame the anguish of incomprehension, which was worse than disappointment. She didn't bear a grudge against her father; she merely registered the growing weight of the fate which spoilt all the enterprises in which he was involved, postponing midnight suppers and skipping birthdays, as if it didn't matter being ten years old when you were thirteen or celebrating Christmas on New Year's Day. It was abominable and yet Fouquet felt a sort of relief; when you had got to that point, anything could happen, you had touched the bottom. . . .

As for Quentin, he found himself with a glass in front of him once more. His ears were still buzzing with the noise in the square, and he still felt sporadic bursts of anger against the whole world and a great tenderness for this little curly-headed brother of his who followed his devils wherever they led him. And what had *he* done during the last ten years? He had sucked sweets and given himself good marks: First Prize for Impassivity! First Prize for Renunciation! First Prize for Prudence! . . . Not a wave, not a ripple on the surface of his life; ten parsimonious years entrenched

behind gimcrack barricades and a vow. Admittedly the vow was a nuisance; it wasn't like Quentin to take back a promise. But what value had a vow which had become a bet, a bet which had become mere pig-headedness? God didn't want a creature made for a single performance: from somebody like himself he certainly expected a constant fight. 'And then, you old hypocrite, admit that you're dying to have a drink like other people, and that you're not likely to have such a splendid excuse for a long time to come.' He saw that Fouquet, sitting on one side with his legs crossed and his back bowed, was taking care not to look at him. The young man only settled down opposite him again when he had swallowed his first mouthful, which brought tears to his eyes; then straight away, came the feeling of warmth. . . .

'I told you we'd get together after the bullfight,' said Fouquet. 'Did you like it?'

'It's a tricky business and no mistake,' replied Quentin, clearing his throat. 'You had us really worried. So you're trying every possible way of smashing yourself up, are you?'

'Don't talk like an idiot,' said Fouquet pompously. 'If you noticed, I didn't raise my heels once. But you arrived late; you missed the first three bulls. The second was a good one and came at the cloth beautifully. With the fourth, I could really have done another natural. As for the fifth and last, let's say no more about it. . . .'

To banish the thought of Marie and to melt into the liquid atmosphere in which he was beginning to float once more, with all his worries caught in an imaginary sieve, he asked Annie to fill up their glasses. Quentin made no objection.

'That fifth bull,' he said, 'I'd like to have bashed its face in. Just to make my little contribution to the fiesta. . . . It's no fun going to collect a pal at the police station, because you feel that you ought to be in there with him.'

'Oh, that was bound to happen. Corridas aren't allowed here. All the same, I made a great hit.'

'There's only Claire missing,' Quentin said boldly. 'The three of us were going out together, if I remember rightly. . . .'

'Forget about Claire; that will come in time. We are all destined to meet again. I've decided to draw my flock a little closer together. We've been seeing too many people and selling ourselves retail. We ought to give ourselves wholeheartedly.'

Quentin nodded in agreement, but he had already stopped following what his companion was saying, and had abandoned himself to the hazards of the port of call, where figures no sooner appear than they fade into the fog. Once the first adjustments have been made, you give up trying to ride the other man's horse, which has always been running for years. For his part, after talking about this and that, he finally embarked on a favourite pirate story in which the English garrison came off rather badly. He was learning how to relax all over again, and had settled down sideways between the table and the wall so that he could address both the room, which was empty, and Fouquet, who was only half-listening to him.

'Well,' he said at last, 'if you've had enough, my boy, it's time we were getting back to barracks.'

Seeing them get up, Annie offered them a drink on the house. They had it at the bar, lingering over it as if it were a stay of execution, and an hour later they were still there, without a care in the world, revelling in the unavowed pleasure of having put themselves outside the law. From now on Annie joined them in every drink, watching them without showing her boredom.

'I drink to Admiral Rigault de Genouilly,' said Quentin, 'but for whom our hostess, born in Saigon to a couple of

Nha quès, would never have obtained a pub licence in Calvados.'

'To the health of El Gallo,' retorted Fouquet, 'the bald matador who, thirty years ago, killed the famous bull Boadbil for the Mercada of Barcelona.'

'To the glory of Francis Garnier, the father of the soldiers of the Expeditionary Corps!'

'To Juan Belmonte, the prince of the derechazos and the volapie!'

'To the memory of Negrier, killed by a pack of cowards in the Lang-Son ambush!'

'To the memory of Manolete, who died with his muleta in his hand in the Linares bull-ring!'

They weren't taken in by these somewhat forced litanies, but that was how men from two regiments always fraternized if they were proud of their badges. The desire not to be outstripped by the other carried them on from one drink to the next. Finally Annie thought fit to issue a warning:

'Dirty weather, gentlemen: if you go on like this, you're both going to get drunk.'

Quentin gave her a scornful look.

'You may be right,' he said, 'but a man wants to have a bit of fun when he's on leave. We didn't come here to play mah-jong. Sonny, we're going back to town.'

Hunting in his pockets for money, he came across his railway ticket and gazed at it dully for a moment. Then he tore it into two, giving one half to Fouquet.

'Take this,' he said, 'and do the same with yours. Like that, neither of us can go with the other.'

'You know I haven't got one,' Fouquet said dolefully.

Quentin shrugged his shoulders and tossed his ticket into an ashtray.

'Now we're prisoners,' he said unemotionally.

Outside he stopped to look at the vast panorama speckled

with tiny lights, in which towns and villages were marked by milky concentrations like groups of globules seen under a microscope.

'I can hear sirens,' he murmured in a tone of cold ecstasy. 'We've a long step in front of us.'

Fouquet never so much as wondered why they were returning to Tigreville by a roundabout route along the steepest of paths; it didn't occur to him that Quentin had just toppled over into a fanatic world in which years of silence were seeking belated satisfaction. He followed tamely in his companion's footsteps, listening to him humming, 'Nights of China, nights of joy . . .' Suddenly he saw him blunder into a bush, coughing, choking, vomiting. . . .

'Don't come any nearer. I'm not used to it any more. . . . That bitch of a native has poisoned me. . . . You've always got to watch out for bandits at Sun-Ya-Tsen.'

Fouquet went forward to support the grey-haired head whose impressive proportions added to his own confusion. The incident did something to clear his mind and he thought to himself that at this very moment he could have been arriving in Paris with his daughter, his conscience more or less clear, instead of murmuring encouragement in the autumn wind to an old renegade who couldn't take his liquor any more and whose surface authority abandoned them in the open country. Quentin guessed the turn his thoughts were taking and hurriedly assured him that he was feeling fitter than ever. But he was furious with himself, and as soon as they got to the outskirts of the town he made straight for Esnault's.

'It's all very well fighting cars,' he said, 'but I haven't had my fun yet, remember.'

It was after dinner-time and a few men had returned for their Saturday game of belote or to wait for their wives to come out of the cinema. Fat Simone was the first to see

them: the old man in his stained jacket, head down and knees bent, and the young man following him with a smile on his lips. Ignoring the surprised looks that greeted his entrance, Quentin, massive as a cupboard, walked straight across the café and said:

‘Calvados.’

‘Glad to see you again, Albert,’ replied Esnault, with an attempt at somewhat sardonic courtesy. . . . ‘And you?’ he asked Fouquet.

‘The same.’

Quentin twiddled his glass between his fingers for a moment, then emptied it at one gulp.

‘Same again.’

Esnault, leaning over for the bottle, whispered to the young man:

‘Looks as if you’ve won.’

‘Shut your trap,’ snapped Fouquet.

‘What’s the matter with you? Anyway, I thought you’d gone.’

Quentin suddenly stretched his arm out across the bar, his hand half-open as if ready to catch a fly.

‘Esnault,’ he said in a curiously calm voice, ‘I forbid you to say *tu* to my friend. You heard what I said? You don’t belong to the same family, you and him. I gather you’ve been trying to turn him against me. You’ve been wasting your time. I’m used to people talking about me behind my back: the kids being told, “If only you’d known him in the old days!” and the old fools swigging their brandy and chortling, “It hasn’t stopped us enjoying life!” I’ve always kept my trap shut. But you, you’re a little shit. . . .’

The hand flattened out against Esnault’s face, and he staggered back against a set of shelves, knocking over a glass.

‘That’s just a warning shot!’

There was a scraping of chairs, and shouts of, 'See here, Quentin! . . . Monsieur Quentin!' Simone rushed forward.

'You're both of you drunk!' she said.

'Well?' said Quentin, turning to face the other customers. 'That's what you wanted, isn't it? . . . Now you've got it!'

Esnault had got his breath back. There was a nasty look in his eyes, but Fouquet was watching him closely.

'Albert,' he said, 'you'll never set foot in here again.'

'You're right there,' replied Quentin. 'And this time you won't wonder why. Nor will the rest of you. And if any of you imagine this will all be forgotten tomorrow because I'll have slept it off, then you can think again. I don't know you any more; we don't belong to the same battalion.'

Nobody said anything until they had crossed the threshold. Outside, they stood in silence for a moment, savouring a victory to which Fouquet was inclined to attribute exaggerated importance. All the rather sketchy qualities which he had detected in Quentin's everyday behaviour showed to magnificent advantage when he was drunk; instead of throwing cold water on his whimsical fancies, he gave them the force of law; with him you went through the world like a knife through butter. He reproached himself for having had doubts about him a little earlier, on account of a momentary physical weakness which the other seemed to have overcome, and felt ready to plunge by his side into the heart of revolutionary China, to turn the dens of Shanghai upside down, to make themselves respected. When people respected you, everything was easier; it wasn't too late to think about that instead of going on making faces at himself in the mirror. He tried to give shape to the serious thoughts which entered his mind, clouds which kept breaking up but none the less deposited a little lead in his brain.

'And what about your wife?' he asked. 'She's going to hold this against me.'

'Don't talk about that on patrol,' said Quentin.

The thought of Suzanne rarely intervened when he was out on a spree. He wasn't one of those sensitive souls who worry themselves sick over something that can't be remedied. A little earlier, when the idea had occurred to him that he was going to hurt Suzanne, he had got rid of it by telling himself that this long retreat had left him with enough credit in the conjugal bank to allow him a night of self-indulgence. He was already very drunk. Now, with a grim look on his face, he was guiding his pal Gabriel through a jungle which might have been the municipal park, among tree-ferns which were vaguely reminiscent of lamp-posts, taking care not to tread on hose-pipes coiled up like boas.

'Objective?' asked Fouquet.

'Blangy, in the Somme,' he replied. 'I must introduce you to my father.'

There came a moment when all roads led to Father, whether he was dead or alive.

'Don't worry,' he added. 'We'll do it easily.'

Forgetting the cyclical rhythm which governs a good blind, the young man was surprised to find his mentor in the thickest of mental fogs, and to make up for this he tried to gather together a few shreds of reason.

'Impossible, Albert,' he said. 'I can't leave here.'

Quentin stopped short and took him by the lapel of his jacket.

'You want to ditch me, don't you? You'll be declared a deserter.'

'No, old chap, but I've got a mission to carry out too.'

'Then we'll carry it out together.'

He seemed to be in no hurry to let Fouquet go. They stood there arguing for some time.

'It's my daughter, you see. I've got to go and fetch her.'



'Well, we'll both go and fetch her. Where is the girl, in distress?'

Something warned Fouquet that it was too late to go to the Dillon Institute and that he was going down a slippery slope; at the same time, he told himself that if he left a message for Marie, he could collect her the next day. Nothing was entirely lost. The next day, things always sorted themselves out. It was a comforting thought.

'Aren't you surprised that I've got a daughter?' murmured Fouquet.

'That's a good one, that is!' said Quentin. 'Remind me to go and fetch my father. . . .'

The Côte des Mouettes was in darkness except for one window on the ground floor of the school. The two men had to walk right round the building before they found the main entrance. Quentin inspected the approaches with the eye of a connoisseur.

'She's in there, is she?' he asked. 'At first sight the defences look pretty weak. All the same, we mustn't let them see that we aren't up to strength.'

'Perhaps it would be even better if you kept out of sight. You could come up in support if I found it necessary.'

'Let me go first,' suggested Quentin, setting his teeth.

Fouquet had to explain to his companion that it was his right as the child's father to make the initial onslaught before Quentin would agree to remain hidden in a gap in the hedge, where he ensconced himself with ludicrous precautions. Then he rang the bell, not very hard to begin with. But the anxiety which was making his heart pound wildly also stirred up the alcohol in his blood, and after ringing several times in vain he threw discretion to the winds.

'It's an insult,' said Quentin, joining him where he stood. 'An insult to the flag. Let's not wait any longer but go right in. I've found a way through the redan.'

In spite of himself, Fouquet followed on his heels, and pushing aside the strands of barbed wire that blocked their path, they managed to make their way under cover of the trees up to the carefully bolted door.

'With a 37 howitzer we'd soon have this down,' said Quentin, and he forgot himself so far as to batter the door with his fists.

A light came on in the porch; the door opened almost at once; Solange Dillon, the niece, appeared in a tartan dress. She wasn't made up and her haughty face looked cold and hard under the granite-coloured hair which had been put up for the night. The top step of the flight provided her with a sort of pedestal. From it she looked down in disapproval at the two untidy individuals in front of her, whose ill-assorted clothes gave a touch of drama to the scene.

'So it's you, Monsieur Quentin, creating this din at this late hour and trespassing on private property. I had heard that you were making a highly desirable recovery. Has some misfortune overtaken you?'

'Quartermaster Quentin Albert of the Far East Expeditionary Corps, stationed at Chungking,' gabbled Quentin, trying to stand to attention. 'We've come to take delivery of the little girl. You will kindly hand her over to within three minutes from now or you'll have news of my health all right.'

It was difficult to tell how far he was joking. Fouquet, torn between the irritation Mlle Dillon's scornful look caused him, the fear that she might refuse to let him have Marie, and the desire to stand by Quentin, didn't know what attitude to adopt.

'I am Marie Fouquet's father,' he said in the end.

'I see,' said the headmistress in a sarcastic voice. 'Well, you've certainly kept us waiting, and now I can understand why.'

'Will you let me have Marie, yes or no?' he asked timidly, almost beseechingly, not knowing what his rights were, even if he knew his obligations; and this stammering timidity made an even worse impression on Mlle Dillon than Quentin's curses.

'Now?' she said. 'But here the children are in bed by nine, Monsieur. And what would their mothers think?'

'I'm thinking that your three minutes are nearly up,' said Quentin firmly.

'I don't see why we shouldn't take Marie with us, do you, Albert? We can easily fix her up with somewhere to sleep.'

The suggestion remained unanswered, for the Burgundian nurse, sails set and slippers flapping, had just appeared on the scene to swear by all the gods that she knew this gentleman and that he couldn't be Marie Fouquet's father since he was a friend of the family, two things which weren't incompatible in certain circumstances but which called for careful investigation. The resultant discussion was interrupted by shouts from Victoria Dillon, who was intrigued by all the noise: '*Hullo! . . . What is happening? Who is it?*'

'If the English are already here, then I'm prepared for anything,' chuckled Quentin.

Yet he could scarcely have been prepared for the astonishing sight of the old lady hurtling along in her bath-chair and trying hard to conceal the indecent curiosity which was eating her up. This dual movement gave her person a kind of vibrant immobility which reflected fairly well the tense situation between the besieged garrison of the Dillon Institute and the besiegers.

'Let me handle this,' said Quentin. 'I know how to talk to the English, in French too. It's about time they tried to understand.'

'You're wasting your breath,' said Fouquet. 'She's French.'

'Huh! Like Colonel Lawrence was Arabian.'

And with the support of anecdotal references, he promptly proceeded to tackle her on the subject of the British technique of aggrandizement, the uncompromising dishonesty of which affected even the relations between the seamen, petty officers and naval officers of the two countries. In return he got a broadside of observations delivered with an Oxford accent from which a livelier mind would have gathered that Victoria Dillon agreed with everything he said and was indeed an interested party. But Quentin didn't understand English and the livelier minds were preoccupied with another problem, namely whether Marie should be woken up to settle the question of Fouquet's identity. The headmistress set her face against the idea.

'Tomorrow, if you like,' she said, 'when you will be in a better condition to see her, if you'll allow me to say so.'

She counted on using the respite to obtain some more information about him. At the end of his tether, Fouquet capitulated. He was vaguely aware that he was taking considerable risks with this affair.

'What!' exclaimed Quentin when he was told the outcome of the negotiations. 'But this is Fashoda all over again!'

'Let's drop it for tonight and go home.'

'That's striking the colours too quickly for my liking. I know we're allies, with equal interests in the life of this little girl, and there are no holds barred. But all the same, we ought to do things properly. . . .'

Leaning over the old lady's bath-chair and wagging his forefinger under her puzzled eyes, he went on:

'I'm asking the commanding officer to inform her men that we agree to a postponement till tomorrow, to avoid a rupture of diplomatic relations. In return, I insist on the child being brought to my headquarters on Sunday at ten

hours, with all her arms and equipment, without a hair on her head being touched. You can treat that as an ultimatum.'

The headmistress in her turn gave way in order to get rid of these bibulous tramps; she would be hanged if by the following morning she hadn't found out what truth there was in their story. Quentin and Fouquet plunged into the dark once more, muzzy-headed, furry-tongued, and for different reasons sick at heart.

'You're in command,' said Quentin, 'but you must admit that as operations go, that was no great shakes. In China, you had to be firmer than that in my day. . . .'

'You don't think we came it a bit too strong?'

'Oh, no!' said Quentin. 'Not you! You've got what you wanted. . . . As for me, I'd like people to know that one day a young man and an old man went together towards . . .'

He made a sweeping gesture.

'Towards what?' asked Fouquet without overmuch interest.

'I don't know. It's about time somebody sent up a flare, a whole collection of flares. . . . Just to paint the town red.'

'A flare?'

'Why, yes, some fireworks to wake it up a bit, to show it that we exist, and that it's just possible that it may exist too. I've watched some wonderful firework displays here during the last war. In a way you could see better than you can now. There must be some left somewhere, like mines in the cliff, like hidden arms, like silent passions. . . .'

'You'll find your flares in a shop by the church,' said Fouquet, carried away in spite of himself. 'There's a man with a beard there who keeps the past in stock and the secrets of life in tins.'

'But of course!' said Quentin admiringly. 'Brother, I spoke too soon: you're a great leader. Especially as the man in question will give us a drink; he's a friend of ours.'

A few minutes later, the two men came out on to the square in front of the church, where the echo of their footsteps rose as high as the steeple. Fouquet felt rather proud of himself, imagining that he was going to introduce the old man to a sort of opium den he didn't know about. The front of Landru's shop, cluttered up with languid clothes, evoked the idea of a false bottom, hidden secrets; a ray of moonlight falling on the ventilators added to the illusion of a plot being hatched in the basement.

'We don't know the password.'

'It's enough for us to show our faces,' said Quentin, picking up a handful of gravel which he threw at the first-floor windows.

Landru opened his shutters just as eleven o'clock was striking, as if his house had been a cuckoo-clock. This comic-opera vision put Fouquet in an even better humour than before. What he most enjoyed about these nights out was this kind of roundabout which never stopped turning but went on going up and down. After explanations, supplications and altercations, Landru came downstairs to open the door.

'The wife's asleep,' he said in a sinister voice. 'Let's go into the workshop.'

'Bring some brandy,' said Quentin. 'This is an important deal.'

They sat down round the bottle, in a store-room littered with packing-cases and bales of material. Quentin, crimson in the face, had settled down on a chest and was talking with a painstaking precision which Landru obviously found pleasing. When he had finished, the shopkeeper scratched his head with an air of self-importance.

'In the way of war booty, I haven't got what you're looking for. All I've kept from the Occupation and the Liberation are these lots of old combinations and brassières.'

Not a single rocket, not a single tracer bullet. But, by an extraordinary fluke, I may be able to satisfy you and more than satisfy you, that is if you agree with me that state industries and big private companies can't hold a candle to a craftsman who knows his job.'

Quentin and Fouquet agreed readily enough.

'Well, I happen to possess one of the masterpieces of pyrotechnical craftsmanship,' Landru continued. 'You may remember, Albert, that fancy-dress ball which Sir Walter Krushtein was going to give in the early 'thirties and which he had to cancel on account of his smash. He was left with a firework display bearing the signature of that incomparable master Ruggieri. I bought it from him cheap, and I'm prepared to sell it to you cheap.'

'Come round to the hotel next week and I'll settle up with you,' said Quentin. 'Can we see it?'

'I know it sounds funny,' Landru said to Fouquet, 'but you're sitting on it.'

The arsenal consisted of about twenty boxes which they opened with punctilious care to check the condition of the fireworks. .

'This is perfect,' said Quentin. 'Now we've nothing to do but carry it down to the beach. You're coming with us, of course.'

'Me?' exclaimed Landru. 'You must be out of your mind! What about my wife?'

'And what about mine, and his, and theirs? . . . After all, it's for our wives that we're doing this!'

'I could see it just as well from here.'

'Out of the question. You can't enjoy a thing like this on your own.'

'Well then, just to lend you a hand,' said Landru. 'Give me time to slip on an overall.'

They had to make several trips down to the little bay. The

programme gave the first item as 'Twenty-three air maroons and ten multicoloured star shells.'

At the Stella, there was still a lot of activity. The foreigners were dawdling in the dining-room and clustering together on the stairs and in the corridors for long unintelligible palavers. Marie-Jo kept yawning and going to see Suzanne to derive a little stimulation from the atmosphere of drama, rather as she might pinch herself. Mme Quentin showed little sign of the sense of disaster that filled her. Albert's suitcase was still on the table and Fouquet's had been put beside it, like a couple of cenotaphs. Catastrophes don't choose the victims they bring together.

When the first explosion shook the building, Suzanne—and this was the opinion of most of the citizens of Tigreville—thought that a mine had blown up; this was a danger never very far from local preoccupations. This explosion startled people; the rest aroused their curiosity. Soon the sound of shouts and running feet could be heard in the streets. Suzanne went to the door: in the sky, to the accompaniment of a series of bangs, the 'Saxon butterflies' were gathering honey from the 'Surprise fans', and the 'Rotating flox' were wandering into the 'Hanging gardens'.

'This is terrific!' said an enthusiastic Englishman. 'Is it *Son et Lumière?*'

Suzanne had made up her mind not to follow the crowds streaming towards the Boulevard Aristide-Chany when Esnault called out to her with malicious joy:

'Congratulations, Madame Quentin. It seems that Albert's down on the beach.'

She ran after the rest. A crowd had collected at the end of the promenade nearest the Côte des Mouettes, whose contours were being lit up by the waves of a 'Magnificent magic waterfall with fifteen frames supporting coloured



jets, accompanied by the explosion of forty oriental bombs'. She recognized her husband and Fouquet in the sooty, jerky figures moving swiftly from darkness into light, galloping between the blockhouses in a scarifying glow, and nailing sparks to pillars of fire. The picture conjured up the spectre of war so effectively, in spite of the magnesium chrysanthemums, that somebody couldn't help mentioning the mines again, and confusion reigned until some volunteers offered to go and bring back the reckless artificers.

Fouquet was busy arranging a battery of Roman candles, looking admiringly now and then at Quentin, who, his body dripping with sweat and his face streaked with smoke was setting out the component parts of the 'Grand Bouquet: a finale of a hundred bombs of all calibres and categories', when his companion seized him by the shoulders.

'Look! Let's beat it!'

A line of men was moving menacingly across the sands, cutting off their retreat, and a little way behind them Suzanne could be seen ready to parley. Under cover of the distraction created by the dazzling eruption of the Grand Bouquet, Quentin pulled Fouquet over towards the rocks. The comets spinning away above their heads provided them with saintly haloes. Landru had long since disappeared.

'If you're strong enough, we'll try and scale the cliff to get straight on to the plateau.'

They started the climb, scrabbling up the scree to begin with, and then catching hold of the stunted firs which were trying to grow on the rock face. Quentin was amazingly powerful for his age; Fouquet got winded first and called for a breathing-space.

'It makes you feel better,' he said sourly, 'giving me a lesson in gymnastics.'

Quentin burst out laughing.

'You little idiot. This is the sort of thing you can only do when you're drunk. Follow me. I don't want to let the mob get its hands on you.'

'Why me?'

'Because it's bound to be you they're after. They know me; they know they need somebody who's all good or all bad, a solid asset. But you, coming here specially to corrupt me, you're a different kettle of fish.'

'But it's you who have disappointed them; it's you they're going to stone to death.'

'Then we'll die together. Come along here.'

'Where are we going to sleep?'

'In a barn I know. I often went there at the time of the landings.'

High and desolate, the countryside waited. Quentin recognized the field of lucern, the stable, the burnt wall.

'Here we are, Gabriel.'

The young man looked around him. In the distance, close to the shore, the pearls of the Channel lay peacefully in their jewel-cases. He settled down in the hay and dropped off straight away. A few moments later, Quentin stretched himself out beside him. Sleep took them in manly fashion.

## SEVEN

QUENTIN was the first to wake up. It was drizzling slightly and the bells were ringing. A fly was circling round them, the last fly of the season, the only one in the district. He was tempted to see an evil omen in it, but the sight of Fouquet curled up beside him with his head under his jacket reassured him. Of the previous day's adventures he retained only a vague memory dominated by the impression that the young man was the father of a little girl, and the idea struck him as so comical that he didn't hesitate to shake him to ask for confirmation. So it was true! For once the fancies of drunkenness were assuming a physical reality. Starting with Marie, they tried to reconstruct the itineraries and caprices of the night, at the same time tidying themselves up. This rough-and-ready titivation, done facing the open sea, put new life into them. If they still showed all the exterior signs of vagrancy—tousled hair, stubbly chins, crumpled clothes—their souls had remained reasonably fresh. Fouquet's clearest recollection was that his daughter was going to be handed over to him at ten o'clock; Quentin remembered laying down the law at Esnault's. The scandal of the firework display, which

had occurred at a much later stage, was only dimly present to their minds. They made no attempt to get to the core of the matter, but suspected that there were memories to be dug up in that direction. They had reached the point where crimes committed in common seem of no importance. But in point of fact they were whistling to keep their spirits up.

By a tortuous route, a picture came back to Quentin's mind, of Clovis, King of the Franks, being baptized by St Remy, and he realized that this was a problem he would never be able to avoid.

'Look,' he said, 'if Clovis hadn't had himself baptized after his victory, what would you think of the chap? . . . That he was a perjurer and a renegade?'

'Probably,' replied Fouquet, 'but this is no time to start worrying about Clovis.'

'I suppose there is no point in telling you,' said Quentin with a touch of the grand manner, 'that it was on this very spot where we are now that I swore I would never touch another drop.'

Fouquet saw that his companion was growing sad.

'What's done is done,' he said. 'Besides, I seem to remember being told that in serious cases of perjury one heard a cock crowing, and I don't believe . . .'

'You're right,' said Quentin, 'there'll be plenty of time to think about all that tomorrow. I'll talk it over with my father.'

'You still intend to go to Biagny?'

'Why not, since you're leaving too.'

'Perhaps we ought to call it a day,' said Fouquet. 'We've had a great time together.'

He didn't dare talk openly of going back into the town.

'All right,' said Quentin, pushing a big hand through his hair. 'I've an idea that there's a sympathetic connexion between the morning hours, with or without a cock

crowing, and a little white wine. Seeing that the damage is done . . .'

Ever since they had woken up, they had both been avoiding the question of the way they were to behave until the time came for them to part. Were they to pretend to burn what they had adored? Wasn't there a risk of being struck by a thunderbolt as soon as they started again?

Fouquet felt grateful to his companion for speaking first and understood that Quentin needed to air his remorse. He too . . .

'Just as you like,' he said. 'But let's take it easy.'

An hour later, coming into view of the Stella, they saw in the garden a mass of heads bent in the direction of the Canadian soldier's memorial tablet. The major, standing a little to one side, was reading a little speech in four languages, a speech of a simplicity which was probably due to the paucity of his vocabulary but seemed exactly right for the occasion. The comic note was to be struck by the President of the Tiger City Legion, who had written into his reply an allusion to the magnificent firework display given in honour of this annual gathering. This was something Fouquet would never hear about. Quentin pulled at his sleeve. Albert had once again let himself go at the Rayon Vert bar, which they had visited on their way home, and had even given way to a display of emotion or fatigue at the thought of leaving the young man: 'What have I got to look forward to?' His eyes were now both tired and shining.

'Let's go round the back. And let's stick together. . . . You know, old man, I've just remembered something I'd forgotten: it's always when there's a ceremony or something like that when he ought to stay sober that a chap get's drunk. It never fails; it's like vertigo, the more you take care, the more certain you are to fall. . . .'

They slipped into the deserted kitchen, and Fouquet felt a sudden pang at the sight of the place where he had cooked his paupiettes, centuries ago now. . . . But Marie was in the hall between Suzanne and Mlle Dillon, sitting on her suitcase just as he had imagined her, and the barriers that broke down at that moment carried everything away with them. After the long watches on the beach, it was if the people in a picture had suddenly dropped their poses to jump out of the frame. She threw her arms round his neck. A bugle sounded outside the hotel.

'By virtue of the powers conferred upon me,' murmured Quentin. . . .

'You're all prickly,' Marie said to her father. 'It's nice.'

'It's like chestnuts, soft inside.'

The headmistress came up in her flat shoes.

'I would point out that you have a train before lunch. You have no time to lose.'

'You're right,' said Fouquet, and he looked at Albert.

Quentin was talking to Suzanne, without humility or irritation. She was answering him, without anger or sadness. What were they saying to each other? Exchanging the secrets of old age perhaps. Fouquet took Marie by the hand and led her towards the two old people to bring them a little peace.

'I'm leaving, too,' said Quentin. 'We're leaving together. I'll get to Blangy one way or another.'

Fouquet glanced inquiringly at Suzanne, who replied with an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders. This wasn't her province. Yet she accompanied them to the gate and watched the three of them disappear into the mist. Albert had taken Marie's other hand.

'After all,' she thought as she closed the door, 'I can't deny him those children too. . . .'

The two men, leading Marie along with exaggerated care, looked extraordinarily maladroit as they went up the slope towards the station. As soon as she could, she broke away and ran ahead.

'Three generations that need to get used to one another,' said Quentin with tears in his eyes. 'Sometimes they leave it a bit too late. Tonight, when I become a son again myself, I shall have forgotten all I've learnt.'

Fouquet made no reply. On the opposite pavement, the two girls from the Chemin Grattapain were walking arm-in-arm on their way to church. Seeing him with a suitcase, they turned round several times without showing the slightest sign of emotion.

'You know them?' asked Quentin.

'No. They are Sunday girls.'

Sunday girls, of the kind who now and then force you to look up and give a holiday to sadness and lethargy: there were some in every village in the world to restore the balance; and perhaps it was the boys who invented them.

Quentin had accompanied Fouquet and Marie to their seats. He didn't get out when the train started moving.

'Albert, this isn't your train, is it?'

'What does that matter?'

'And your ticket?'

'Oh, I'll manage all right.'

'This isn't like you.'

'You don't know me very well.'

Marie didn't appear to appreciate this rather overpowering person who now and then gave her a curiously wild-eyed look. She curled up on the seat and responded only with a certain reluctance to her father's entreaties. He for his part reproached himself for feeling the same impatience with his old companion that he had sensed in his accomplices on the morning after a blind, when it was time to go home. The

rootless one today was this huge oak of a man, clumsily trying to please. So it was something of a relief when he stood up as the train started drawing into *Isicux*.

'I'm going to change here; I'm sure to find a connexion for Amiens; I've got plenty of time. They'll see me at Blangy after all. Goodbye, children. . . .'

They lost sight of him among all the people getting in and out. But he reappeared just as the train was about to leave. He was standing under the clock, partly hidden by the signal-post, and was gazing impassively in their direction, his long arms pressed against his body, pulling his peasant shirt even further open at the neck, his brown-flecked hands clasped behind his back. As the engine started moving, he suddenly ran up to their window.

'You'll come back, won't you? You'll come back?'

'And what about you?' shouted Fouquet, with a lump in his throat.

'Oh, I'll come back, I'll come back!'

The other passengers looked sympathetically at father and daughter, and Fouquet felt that he didn't deserve it. 'Your friend is funny,' Marie had said with a superior voice, and the remark had irritated him. He kept thinking of the old man who was going to land up at Blangy station as usual and perform his ticket—barrier scene as usual, a ham actor inspired by the revival of his great success. . . .

'I see you're wearing the pullover I sent you,' he said, not without polemical intent.

'Yes, I wear it every day,' she said calmly.

The first lie, which perhaps wasn't a lie, and to which he hadn't got the key. After only an hour, he had had enough! With that wonderful instinct which tells children where to strike, Marie decided to act younger than she was.

'Tell me a story,' she said, nestling up against her father.



Fouquet didn't know any stories.

'Then make one up. You used to when I was young,' she added comically.

It was then that he told her the story of the monkey in winter.

'It's a true story,' he said. 'That friend of mine who came with us today told it to me not so long ago. In India or China, when it starts getting cold, you find little monkeys all over the place where they've no business to be. They've come there out of curiosity or fear or disgust. And since the local inhabitants believe that even monkeys have souls, they give money so that they can be taken back to their native forests where they have their habits and their friends. And trains full of animals go steaming into the jungle.'

'He's really seen monkeys like that?'

'I know he's seen one at least.'

'The monkey copies man,' she chanted.

'What's that you said?'

'Something we say at school to annoy each other.'

Great stretches of wall darkened the windows. After slipping between the points and through a thicket of electric pylons, the train was entering the cuttings which give advance notice of suburban stations.

'Our forest is coming closer,' said Fouquet.

He found it again going down the stairs at Saint-Lazare station, in the exuberant glare of the neon lighting. At the foot of the steps, a legless cripple was querulously humming a tune and holding out his hand. A rich-looking gentleman in a fur-lined coat went past and either failed to see the hand or ignored it. But a few yards further on, Fouquet noticed that it was he who was humming the tune and seemed quite happy about it. . . . A forest in which almsgiving took a curious form.

'After all,' he thought, 'Quentin has gone off too with

my song on his lips. Perhaps he's taken my burden with him and I'm a beggar who is going to walk again.'

Marie was already running towards a taxi. He unashamedly stopped her, thinking of Albert's itineraries.

'Darling, let's take a bus so that we can see Paris together.'

'We'll be held up by the traffic.'

'All the better.'

'Daddy,' she said, 'I don't want to go back again. I don't want to stay at that school. The others are too big for me.'

'You are right,' he replied. 'We are going to try and make a new life for ourselves.'

'Are you coming home?'

'Tomorrow perhaps.'

But that night he went to Claire's flat, saw that there was a light, and decided not to ring. Tomorrow perhaps. . . .

He took a room in the nearest hotel. Without her knowing it, they would hear the same bells, belong to the same parish, and that was already something.

He spent a long time leaning out of the window, listening to the sounds of his forest. Then, closing the shutters, he went to the mirror, saying to himself:

'And now there's a long winter ahead. . . .'